

# TELEPHONE TIPS

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Do you remember Lily Tomlin's irreverent impersonation of Ernestine, the incompetent operator? "Hello, is this the party to whom I'm speaking?" Ernestine would sniff with her trademark squinty eyed, dried prune expression. Ernestine could use some tips on appropriate telephone behavior, not that she'd ever choose to use them, of course.

One of the reasons we laugh at Ernestine is because she strikes a chord of recognition in us; we've all felt angry, frustrated, and abused at one time or another when using the phone. Ernestine flaunted the unique set of rules that has grown up around the telephone. I can only guess that Alexander Graham Bell would have been amused with Ernestine and bemused by the enormous implications of her performance.

We tend to take the telephone for granted, but it's important that, unlike Ernestine, salespeople demonstrate courteous telephone behavior when talking to clients and other business contacts. Courtesy and thoughtfulness are the basic components of telephone etiquette. The knowledge of etiquette makes telephoning easier because if you creatively obey the rules, you can be confident that you will behave in the most appropriate, productive way.

Some of my telephone tips may seem obvious, but you would be surprised at how many times I've found that even the most basic telephone etiquette is ignored or abused. With this in mind, here are some guidelines for polite and effective telephone usage for your receptionist, secretary, and you:

1. When answering the phone in the office, immediately identify your company, department, and your name. If you are self-employed with a home office, answer by stating your name.
2. When talking to customers, call them by name. Not only will the customer be pleased, but also by repeating the name you're more likely to remember it the next time. Be sure not to overuse this though, as this habit can be annoying.

This also applies when you find a friendly secretary. In the future you can call her by name and create a rapport.

3. Know yourself and how you sound to others. You can find this out by recording your voice. Then critique your tone, manners, friendliness, and vocal quality. This is even more helpful if others critique you.
4. Always use the hold button if you must temporarily leave the phone. It's surprising what the person on the line can hear, and you may inadvertently embarrass yourself -- or the other person.
5. Excuse yourself when leaving the line. A simple, "One minute, please, Jim," will do. Then make sure you reassure the customer every 20-30 seconds that you haven't forgotten him. If you must do this more than twice, it's probably better to call back when you're able to talk.
6. Listen. Allow your prospect to talk and encourage her input. No one likes to be "talked at." Listen for ideas, not just words, and take brief notes to jog your memory later. In addition:
  - Ask as many open-ended questions as possible.
  - Listen to what is being said, not just the words that are being spoken.
  - When pauses occur, don't interrupt until the prospect is finished with her thought.
  - Reinforce the client's participation by giving verbal feedback. A simple "yes" or "I see" will suffice.
  - Make sure you understand what the client is saying and avoid jumping to conclusions.
  - Toward the end of the call, arrange for the next call and express your sincere gratitude for the opportunity to talk with her.
7. Know your company and fellow employees. A sense of camaraderie is projected if you know how to contact someone in another department or branch. You and your company look good when you try to help. Keep a list of

employee names, departments, and extension numbers next to your phone so you can be as helpful as possible.

8. Know your customers. Know not only their names, but also how they prefer to be treated. Then deal with them in their preferred mode. Do they like a fast or slow pace? Do they want just the facts or do they prefer to chat first before getting down to business?
9. Know your product or service. Your depth of knowledge about what you know best should shine through. Then you'll be able to match customer needs (benefits) with your product knowledge (features).
10. Keep a telephone note pad and pen by the phone so you can quickly write messages or notes. We've all waited for what seems to be ten minutes while the harried message taker searches for a pencil.
11. Screen calls for the caller's name, "Who's calling please?" When transferring a call, say, "Thank you, Miss Smith. I'm ringing Miss Jones now," or "Thank you Miss Smith. Miss Jones is on another line at the moment. Would you prefer to hold for a minute or have her return the call?" If Miss Jones is unavailable, try, "Thank you, Miss Smith, Miss Jones is out of the office now and isn't expected back till 4 o'clock. Mr. Robertson may be able to help you, or would you prefer that Miss Jones return your call?"
12. Plan your calls ahead. Know where you're going and how you're going to get there. Try writing a summary of everything you need to know to make the call. Fill out your planner in advance and have a separate one for each call. Every call you make should have an objective (goal).
13. Let them hang up first. Have you ever concluded a conversation with someone and just as they were hanging up, you thought of one more thing to say? This happens because we think so quickly. To avoid cutting off your prospect's thoughts, let the prospect hang up first. Stay on the phone during the silence until you finally hear the click and dial tone on the line.

14. When calling long distance, tell the secretary. People give long distance calls a higher priority than local calls. If they say, "Do you mind if I put you on hold?" be careful. Some people are not in the habit of checking back with the caller every 20-30 seconds to make sure they are still breathing. Your best bet is to tell the secretary that you can only remain on hold a short time.
  
15. Choose your words carefully. On the telephone, your words and vocal quality carry your message. In person, if there is any doubt as to the meaning, you can sense it from the person's nonverbal feedback. Over the phone, however, you may unintentionally insult your prospective client and never know it. For example, when you say, "As I said..." or "To put it another way..." you imply that the other person did not understand you the first time. Another common phrase is, "Let me ask you a question." It may be subtle, but this is a command, not question. A command immediately puts someone on the defensive. A better way to say this is, "May I ask you a question?" or "Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" This involves them in the conversation and makes them want to talk to you instead of resentfully following your orders.

Are you listening, Ernestine? I hope you picked up some pointers, but I'm not counting on it. As for the rest of you telephone communicators; I hope that these tips will propel you into many rewarding, people-oriented experiences on the telephone. I have a hunch that Alexander Graham Bell, and maybe even Ernestine, would have wanted it that way.