

# In Practice

## Good Customer Phone Form

What happens when an employee in your company picks up the telephone and the person on the other end of the line has a heavy accent? Do your employees have the patience and skills to handle such calls correctly and without giving offense? Nancy Friedman, whose firm, the Telephone Doctor, specializes in phone etiquette, offers a few tips on how to work more effectively over the telephone with people who have different accents.

Don't pretend to understand the caller if you don't. Friedman says that if you don't understand the person you're speaking with, it's acceptable to say gently that you're having trouble understanding. She says to ask people to slow their speech a little so that you can hear all the information correctly. Hanging up without knowing what a caller wants, says Friedman, is not good customer service.

Don't rush the callers, Friedman says. It's threatening. She advises people to listen to a caller's speech pattern to pick up key words and to repeat the key words back. "They'll appreciate the fact that you're really listening," says Friedman.

Don't shout, says Friedman. "People with foreign accents aren't hard of hearing. Nor do you need to repeat one word over and over to be sure they understand. Remember, people with a foreign accent speak two languages. These are not dumb people."

Friedman says that people don't mean to be rude when talking with people who have accents. But phrases such as, "I can't understand you," and "What did you say?" can be perceived as rude. It's better, she says, to take full responsibility and explain that you're having a little difficulty understanding and that if the



speaker would repeat what he or she said, you'll be able to help.

Friedman advises companies to keep job aids available. For example, if you receive repeated calls from people who speak a particular language, she suggests supplying employees with a few common phrases in that group's native language.

"In Spanish, even, 'Uno momento, por favor,' poorly pronounced, would be appreciated by someone who is having difficulty trying to get something over the phone. You can then bring someone to the phone who will be able to assist," says Friedman.

## Checking the Shirts on Their Backs

On any Friday at Dell Computer Corporation in Austin, Texas, you'll find employees dressed in jeans and t-shirts. Company policy states that employees can dress casually on Fridays as long as they wear t-shirts with the Dell name printed on them.

*What happens when an employee must work over the phone with a person who has a heavy accent? Here are some ways to handle such calls without giving offense. Also, t-shirts as motivators, smoother transitions, and a quiz to determine your innovation style.*

Printed across the front of some of those t-shirts you'll see the words "well trained." Across the back you'll see "Dell Trained." Below that is a checklist with such items as "SSP" for "strategic sales presentations" or "ASN" for "advanced sales negotiation." People who have all the items checked off are to be congratulated. It is a signal of honor—such people have joined the ranks of the best-trained workers in the company.

Those wearing the "Dell Trained" t-shirts are part of Dell's salesforce. New salespeople take a seven-week training course on Dell products. They learn to use Dell's order-entry system and to understand the company's price lists and catalogs. And they learn information that is vital to Dell's success; they learn how it feels to be a customer.

"For example," says Carol Shaffer, sales training manager for Dell, "every trainee is given a box with a computer in it and asked to unpack it, install it, and load programs just as a customer might do.

"We also have sales trainees listen to telephone conversations with customers and actually participate on customer calls. We have them analyze calls to customers from the customer's perspective and look for ways to improve."

New trainees are asked to take part in a weekly ritual at Dell, called the Customer Advocate Meeting. Employees from all levels of the company discuss customer complaints and suggestions and consider ways to solve problems and improve service.

Dell's focus on the customer has paid off. Shaffer says the company is leading the industry in revenues and workforce growth. *Business Week* reports that the eight-year-old company's first-quarter profits for 1992 rose 96 percent over those in 1991.

Shaffer is one of the masterminds behind the training t-shirt, which she says has been a great success in improving morale and promoting the need for training. The company has been using the "Dell Trained" t-shirts for 18 months, and Shaffer says she has trouble keeping the shirts in stock because Dell continues to increase its workforce.

New hires get a t-shirt during a

special ceremony in their honor after they complete the first basic training course. As "Pomp and Circumstance" fills the room, the graduates are presented with certificates and the t-shirts. After the graduates have donned the shirts, the first box is checked off. Shaffer assures us that the shirts can be washed. The checks are made with permanent markers and it typically takes 18 months for an employee to complete all six of the courses listed on the shirts.

The new sales reps aren't required to wear their t-shirts every Friday, but Shaffer says many like to wear the shirts because they consider them a badge of honor. Most of the reps do wear the shirts at the completion of each training class so they can get their boxes checked. Some take their completion certificates to their managers to give the managers the honor of checking off their shirts.

Shaffer says the t-shirts helped build credibility for the training course at first. But she is quick to point out that it's the training itself that is getting high marks as the salespeople see how it helps them with their accounts.

She says the t-shirts are a novelty and a hot item. "People are always looking for ways to expand their wardrobe," says Shaffer.

### Failing Transition

**W**hen companies go through major changes, you'd think they'd plan ways of making the transition smooth for employees. But a survey by EnterChange gives companies failing marks in handling employees during change.

The survey asked representatives from *Fortune* 500 companies that have been through recent, significant organizational transitions—mergers, acquisitions, restructuring, or downsizing—to evaluate how effectively managers handled the transitions.

The study found that employees had little or no direction from the top of their organizations. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents said managers were not at all effective or only somewhat effective in communicating to their employees the rationale for change. Seventy-two percent said

their companies were unable to effectively build commitment to the new organizations. Seventy-seven percent said managers did not effectively raise the confidence levels of employees. Fewer than 50 percent said their managers were effective role models during the change.

The study found that productivity dropped by three hours a day during major corporate transition, as a result of poor handling of employees.

A later survey of 203 employees at a large corporation undergoing change confirmed the findings from the initial poll. Only 3 percent of the respondents in the second survey said they received information on the changes through meetings with management. Most employees surveyed (88 percent) said they were dissatisfied with the information they received about benefits and benefit eligibility—a prime concern for many people who are about to be laid off.

Eighty-five percent said they felt anxious about the changes and rated companywide morale at 2.5 on a 10-point scale. Forty percent said they had strong feelings of anger and bitterness and 20 percent felt the company had betrayed their trust.

Of the employees interviewed, 95 percent said that they either had no job to do during the transition—that they were just marking time during that period—or that completing their regular jobs was difficult because of distractions and preoccupations with the uncertainty of transition.

Respondents to the first survey identified five major reasons behind the loss of employee morale during a transition:

- inaccurate grapevine information
- lack of leadership
- lack of trust in the company
- concern over co-workers losing their jobs
- late or inconsistent communication.

The bottom line? "The biggest mistake a company can make," says Jackie Greaner, chairman and CEO of EnterChange, "is to undergo a massive change for the sake of improving profits or competitive edge and not pay enough attention to how these changes will affect the people within the organization."

You can get a copy of the survey by calling EnterChange at 404/633-7792.

## Computing Your Innovation Style

These days top managers are not the only ones expected to use innovative thinking to solve problems. Companies now expect everyone to get into the act.

And it makes sense. Everyone is creative—whether he or she realizes it or not—but everyone has different styles or approaches to generating solutions and bringing about change, says Wilson Learning Corporation, a worldwide training firm. Wilson identifies four styles:

► **Modifying style.** “Modifiers” are stimulated by facts and make decisions based on them. They prefer to move forward one step at a time, building on what is known and proven. They add stability and thoroughness to a team’s creative process.

► **Exploring style.** “Explorers” are stimulated by insights and use them to gather more information. They thrive on the unknown and the unpredictable and are comfortable challenging assumptions and using analogies to approach problems from new angles. Explorers contribute to teams by questioning basic assumptions and models.

► **Visioning style.** “Visioners” are stimulated by insights and make decisions based on those insights. They focus on ideal results and let those images be their guide. Visioners provide teams with long-term direction and momentum.

► **Experimenting style.** “Experimenters” are stimulated by facts and use them to gather more information. Experimenters generate new ideas by combining established processes. They contribute to teams by combining input from everyone to ensure workable, consensus solutions.

If you’re wondering where you fit in, Wilson Learning has a quick quiz to help you determine your style.

For each of the following eight statements, divide a total of five points between the two possible responses. Assign the most points to the statement that you identify with the most. If you give five points to one option, give zero points to the other. If you give four points to one option, give one point to the other, and so on.

As you consider each statement, keep this question in mind: “How do I handle challenges most successfully in my current job?”

► *I like solving problems best when:*

A. there are some standard ways to go about solving them.

B. there needs to be a new way to go about solving them.

► *One of my strengths is:*

C. seeing how different ideas and viewpoints can be related.

D. being highly committed to making things work.

► *I can help innovation by making sure there is:*

A. steadiness and thoroughness when developing new ideas.

B. open-mindedness to a wide range of assumptions and ideas.

► *Sometimes, I might hinder constructive change by:*

C. “leaving others behind” when I focus on future goals.

D. getting lost in the details of implementation and forgetting the goal.

► *I am best at solving problems that:*

A. are specific and have a single, best answer.

B. need many perspectives and alternatives to be considered.

► *I am most successful when I deal with:*

C. insights and connections among ideas.

D. detailed, factual information.

► *I like to find solutions by:*

A. applying expert solutions in new ways.

B. using metaphors and analogies for new insights.

► *I like to find solutions by:*

C. imagining the best possible outcome for everyone.

D. combining the most practical ideas of many people.

Now total your scores in the following categories:

► A. modifying

► B. exploring

► C. visioning

► D. experimenting.

You probably use a combination of styles; your high scores identify your strongest style preferences.

**“In Practice”** is edited and written by **Craig Steinburg**. Send items of interest to “In Practice,” Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.

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