

Phone and Voice Communication

Adapted from a presentation given by Floyd Miller at an AF seminar

Several months ago, I spent around four hours on the phone with customer service regarding a product that I bought. The first product that they sent me was defective and right out of the box it didn't work. After spending time with customer service back and forth and figuring out that it wasn't my fault, they sent me a replacement product. The only problem was that their computer system shipped it to a nonexistent address, so it never got to me. Eventually they shipped me a third one, and this one worked.

But when I returned the first one that didn't work, they sent me an email saying something along the lines of, "We regret to inform you that the technicians determined that your product has been subjected to accidental damage or misuse." And they charged me \$285 for a product that didn't work. So I spent another hour with their customer service getting that ironed out. I spent many hours on the phone talking to many different customer service representatives, and it took two weeks to get a working product.

It sounds like a really bad story. And yet, I would probably buy from them again. But why?

Think about a time that you called a place of business. Maybe you wanted to order a product, ask some questions about a price, determine if the product would work for you, or return a product. Whatever your situation was, think it over and then answer the following yes/no questions:

1. First of all, was your question answered or your problem resolved? Did you get the information that you needed?

2. More importantly, how did you feel about the way that it was resolved? Were you taken care of as a person?
3. And third, if everyone that calls that place of business feels the exact same way you do, will they stay in business?

Why Are Phone and Voice Skills Important?

We all know how to talk. So shouldn't phone and voice skills just come naturally? Why are these skills even important? Why should you pay attention to your voice?

First, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. What you say and how you say it, in every interaction on the phone, is either going to push people away from or bring them closer to the Gospel. The Holy Spirit will bear His fruit in your communications, and over time it will be manifest to all.¹ This is true if you're selling furniture or manure spreaders.

Second, you are the face of your company. Imagine that you call AT&T with a problem, and you talk to Bob, one of their customer service representatives. Bob does a great job and gets all your questions answered. Later, you might be talking with your friends about the interaction. How would you describe it? Would you say, "Bob at AT&T has

¹ Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."

wonderful customer service”? Or would you say, “AT&T has great customer service”?

In the same way, suppose Bob is having a bad day, and things aren’t resolved to your satisfaction. Bob is grumpy and annoyed. You become grumpy and annoyed. When you’re describing that interaction to your friends or to your coworkers, would you say, “Bob at AT&T was having a really bad day and gave me horrible customer service,” or would you say, “AT&T has lousy customer service”?

Based on one conversation with one person, we tend to lump the whole company together. People do that for your company, too. They think your whole company is just like the person who answers the phone. You are the face of your company. You are who they hear. That’s the perception customers have. It doesn’t matter if you have a thousand people working behind you; customers will still think your whole company is just like you.

Establish Trust

Your goal in your phone conversations is always to establish trust. If you don’t have your clients’ trust, you have nothing. Trust is the bottom line—it’s where you start from. It’s your goal throughout all your conversations. If your clients don’t trust you on some level—whatever that level is—you get nowhere that is profitable for either of you.

How can you establish trust?

Use good posture. Having good posture happens before you answer the phone. If you spend a lot of time on the phone, consider standing up if you can. It’s easier to have good posture while standing than it is while sitting. Whether you’re standing or sitting, use good posture. If you’re sitting, sit up straight, keep your shoulders relaxed, and make sure your airway is open. It really does matter; your clients will hear the difference.

Smile. Although a cliché, it’s still true: you need to smile. Your clients will hear it. Some companies have gone so far as to place a mirror by the phone so that the person speaking can see himself or herself when answering the phone. That might be a bit surprising to you. I know that I don’t usually look as happy or sound as happy as I feel. Trying a mirror at least temporarily may be a good idea to cultivate your smile.

Want to talk to your customers. Posture and smiles are external factors but wanting to talk to your customers is an

attitude from the heart. You need to want to talk to them. The story is told of a waitress who came to work having a bad day and feeling grumpy. Her manager noticed this and told her, “I want you to tell each table that you serve today, ‘I like you.’”

She said, “I can’t do that. I can’t tell every group of people that I like them.”

“No, you don’t have to tell them out loud. Tell them in your head. Just as you approach the table, tell them, ‘I like you,’ in your head.”

At the end of the day the manager checked back with the waitress. She said, “It’s not fair. You rigged it. You gave me all the nice customers!”

Having a good attitude is imperative, and it comes from within. You need to want to talk to your clients. They’re not an interruption to your day. They *are* your day. They’re the reason you have a job.

Be respectful with your attention. It’s often easier for us to be respectful with our words. Our parents have trained us to do that. But when you’re on the phone with customers and they’re telling you their situation and all the irrelevant details, it’s easy for you to be disrespectful with your attention. You know the next paragraph before they say it. In fact, you know how the story is going to end because you’ve heard twenty-three other stories just like it in the last month. So you check an email while they’re talking, walk over to the drinking fountain, or make some notes to yourself for after you’re off the phone. You continue to be respectful with your words, but you’re not being respectful with your attention.

When you’re on the phone, do what you would do if the client were sitting in front of you. You wouldn’t check your email while the client is sitting there, so don’t check your email while you’re on the phone with the client. Being respectful with your attention can be tough, but it’s important.

Be thorough and reliable. Clients want someone who is thorough and reliable. They want to know that the information they get from you is correct and that they can depend on what you have to say. So when you’re not sure how to answer a question they ask, use phrases like, “Let me double check that for you” or “Would you mind holding while I verify that with someone else?” That way your clients know they can depend on what you have to say. They want someone who is thorough.

Use common language. Common language is using words and phrases that are easy for the customer to understand. We all develop company jargon or lingo—words that you use inside the company that are specific to your company or industry. But clients might not understand your jargon. You want them to feel that they are capable and competent individuals, and if they're not understanding your language, it often leads to withdrawal and decreases trust. Use words and phrase things in a way that they know what you mean.

Be trustworthy. If a caller asks about a product you don't have, you have two options: try to sell them a different product that's not quite what they need, or refer them to a competitor that does carry the exact product they want. If you sell them a product that isn't going to meet their needs, you break their trust: their expectations aren't met and they become unsure if they can trust you because you've made a wrong recommendation. If, however, you refer them to your competitor and that ends up being exactly what they wanted, guess who they're going to call next time they have questions? You. So you want your company to be trustworthy, and you can only do that by being completely honest with your customers and referring them to your competitors when necessary.

The Greeting

Your phone conversation starts with a greeting, but your actual interaction starts before the greeting. When the phone rings, take a deep breath. Check your posture. Make sure you're ready. Wipe your mental slate clean from whatever you were working on and whatever other problems you were dealing with so that you have focus for this client. It's your chance to be relaxed, patient, and confident and to make a good initial impression. It is also the beginning of a conversation that you seek to fill with grace.¹

The greeting should be friendly and include the name of your company unless the company name is on a phone system greeting that customers hear before they ever get to you. They need to know this is the company that they were trying to reach. Even if they've been waiting for an answer or have been on hold, they need to know your name and that you're ready to help them.

¹ Colossians 4:6 "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man."

Following a script when talking with someone on the phone doesn't usually work well, but the initial greeting is one of two times when you should know exactly what you're going to say each time you pick up the phone. A script in this case is simply a standard operating procedure—it is a way to provide phone greetings throughout the company that are consistent with the preferred company culture. You could say, "Good morning! Thank you for calling XYZ Company. My name is Floyd. How may I help you?" Obviously, follow the specific guidelines of your company for how you should answer the phone and what you should say. If you don't know what you're going to say when you answer the phone, your responses through the day will likely vary widely, and your customers may not get a good first impression of your company.

Be sure you get the caller's name and possibly a call-back number, especially if you're going to put them on hold or transfer them. A call-back number allows you to return the call if the transfer doesn't go through or the call gets dropped accidentally. Being able to call them back if this happens shows that you're taking good care of the customer.

It's also important to use your customer's name throughout the conversation. Don't overdo this, but showing the customer you remember their name shows them that they are important to you and your company.

The Closing

At the end of your conversation, be sure to clarify any next steps that have been communicated. Clients need to know exactly what they need to do and what you're going to do so that there is no ambiguity about what's next. It is also valuable for you to document next steps for yourself or others who may become involved.

The closing is the second time when you should script communications. Once everything is finished, ask if there is anything else you can do for them. If there is, then do it. Keep asking that question until there's nothing else that they need help with. Then tell them, "Thank you for calling." Doing so says, "Thank you for your business. We're glad you called." It shows appreciation to them as a customer and as a person.

Voice mails and Transfers

Always return voice mails and, if possible, on the same day.

Sometimes that's not possible if you're out of the office for the day or traveling. But you can explain that when you call back. You could also have someone check your voice mails and return your calls for you on the days you're out.

If you're transferring calls within your company, be sure to transfer to the correct person. Listen long enough and closely enough that you know what the customer's problem is and who in the company can help them. Try not to make a customer repeat a lengthy explanation as you transfer him or her to other people in your company. Work toward soft transfers (sometimes called warm transfers), which help a customer avoid the feeling of starting all over again. If your company's phone system is able to implement it, a soft transfer enables you to give to the person that you're transferring the caller a brief description of the caller's problem or need before connecting that person to the caller.

Also, be realistic about hold times. Everyone knows that putting someone on hold for "just a second" is not a second, but nobody knows how long a "second" is. Instead, say "May I put you on hold while I check with [name]?" or "I'll be back in a couple minutes." In order to be realistic, you may need to say, "This is going to take a couple minutes. Would you prefer that I call you back or would you rather wait on hold?"

Difficult Customers

Conversations with difficult customers will happen. What will you do with them?

Listen. Listen carefully to difficult customers, maybe even more carefully than you would the average customer. Stop everything and give them your full attention. A deep level of listening includes how this is affecting the other person and not just how it's affecting you. Yes, seek to understand what they are saying, but even more importantly what they are feeling.

Align with difficult customers. You should never agree with an untruth. But you should seek to align with the customer perspective as quickly as you can. If they feel that you're against them, you will get nowhere. Try to align with their perspective and affirm it by saying things like...

- "That must be very frustrating."
- "I understand why you feel that way."

- "You're right. That is not the way things should be."
- "That is not the way we want to treat our customers."

Avoid the word no. Or say the word *no* and start with another word right after it. Only use the word *no* if you've already unsuccessfully tried more gentle ways. Instead, offer two or three possible solutions. Tell them, "Here's what we can do. We can do this or we can do this. What would you like?"

Don't tell them, "You *have to* do this and this. You *have to* fill out a change request form. You *have to*..." The client isn't required to do anything. It's their choice. Tell them, "In order for us to proceed, we will need for you to do this and this." Or, "If you would like for us to move further on this, I will need to have your signature on this paper."

Ask them to clarify. Ask callers clarifying questions or ask them to restate their problem, which asks them to tell you in different words what you need to know. Some phrases you can use as you relate to difficult callers follow:

- "What do you mean?"
- "I think I understand what you mean, but I'm not quite sure. I want to make sure that I know exactly what the problem is."
- "I truly apologize for this situation." You're not taking the blame on yourself nor putting the blame on the customer. You're just saying, "I'm very sorry for the way things are."
- "You're right. That's not the way it should be."
- "I understand how you feel. That must be very frustrating."
- "Here's what we can do."

Avoid saying these phrases. Following are phrases to avoid in any conversation, whether you are talking with difficult customers or not:

- "You don't understand." It might be true, but saying it conveys condescension. It's saying, "I'm smarter than you. You're not smart enough to figure this out. You simply don't understand."
- "Our policy says..." Your policy might say that, but don't use that as a cop-out because you aren't brave enough to tell them directly. Take responsibility and say, "We're not able to do that, but we can do this and this and this."

- “You have to...” The client isn’t required to do anything. It’s their choice.
- “That’s not how we do it.” Instead, tell them what you can do for them.
- “It’s so simple. It’s so easy.” This sends the message that the customer isn’t smart enough. Instead, say something like, “It can be overwhelming at first, but once I walk you through the process it will seem easy to you.”

Lastly, don’t let that difficult interaction bleed over into your next one. Your difficult customer at 10:00 should not be affecting your customer at 3:00. It’s very easy for that to happen, but don’t let it. If you need to, don’t answer the next call. Take a break. Grab a snack or a drink. Clock out for a bit and breathe deeply. Then answer the next call, ready to provide great customer service.

Core Voice Essentials

Let’s switch gears and consider some core voice essentials.

Volume. Volume varies from being so quiet you can’t hear anything to being so loud that you don’t want to hear anything. Being too quiet indicates a lack of confidence; it gives the client the impression that you don’t know what you’re talking about. On the other hand, being too loud and forthright is abrasive and unprofessional. Aim for something that’s comfortable, clear, and confident—something that is easy for the customer to understand. Don’t mumble or fade off at the end of your sentences. Project your voice clearly. Get a headset if you spend a lot of time on the phone.

Speaking Rate. Speaking rate is the number of words spoken over a given time; in other words, it is how fast you speak. The rate at which you speak is closely connected with your personality. Some people talk slowly because that’s just kind of how they move. And other people are fast talkers because they’re go-getters and that’s the way they live their lives all the time. Consequently, rate can be a bit difficult to change because it’s embedded into your personality. However, it is possible to adjust your rate.

Speaking too slowly makes you sound boring, tired, and less intelligent. Listeners will daydream and run ahead. If you speak too fast, listeners won’t have time to process all the information. They won’t get what you’re

saying, and they may think you’re nervous. They may understand what’s being said, but if the rate is too fast for too long, their brains won’t have time to fully assimilate the information.

So how fast should you talk? Normal conversation ranges from 125 to 225 words per minute. Publishers recommend that books on tape should be voiced at 150 to 160. Auctioneers generally speak 250 to 400 words per minute. So somewhere in that 140–180 words per minute range is usually comfortable for your listeners.

Here are some tips on speaking rate:

- Be aware of how fast you’re talking. Listen to yourself. Awareness is the first step toward improvement.
- Time yourself reading a passage. Do it a couple times. Do it as slowly as you can and then do it as fast as you can.
- Match your caller’s rate. If he’s a fast talker, kick it up a couple notches, or at least talk faster than you usually would.
- Ask someone for feedback. Have them listen to your side of a couple phone conversations.

Inflection. Inflection means emphasizing certain words or syllables. It is changes in pitch within syllables, words, phrases, or sentences. Usually the change in pitch is a raised pitch. Changing the inflection is very powerful and can change meanings:

- I was born in Australia. (**You**, on the other hand, were born somewhere else.)
- I **was** born in Australia. (How dare you imply that I **wasn’t**?)
- I was **born** in Australia. (I’m a **native**—not a newcomer.)
- I was born **in** Australia. (Not **outside** Australia.)
- I was born in **Australia**. (Not in **New Zealand**.)

Here are some inflection tips:

- Think about the message you’re trying to convey.
- Allow yourself the freedom to be friendly and open on the phone. Enjoy each phone call rather than rushing through it and trying to get to the next thing.
- Slow down a bit, emphasizing what’s important.

Conclusion

So why would I go back to a company that shipped a defective product, shipped a replacement to a non-address, and charged me \$285 to fix the first one that wasn't even working when I got it? Here's why:

1. Each of the customer service representatives that I talked to were sympathetic. One even said, "Oh boy, I would *not* be happy if that happened to me!"
2. They always gave the impression that there would be a way to fix my problem; there was always a way forward.
3. When transferring me to another department, they always stayed on the line until I was connected with the next person; they didn't drop me off into an endless labyrinth.
4. They didn't drop the ball. Twice, we were unable to resolve the issue in the same day, and both times the customer service representatives gave me their personal email addresses and phone numbers so that I could reach them the following day to continue working on the issue.
5. Hold times were never more than ten minutes and usually less than two minutes.
6. Every representative was easy to understand and spoke English well.
7. In the end, everything was eventually resolved. They even refunded the \$285.

Not all your customers will always have a positive experience with you, your company, or your product. But you have the ability, and the privilege, of offering them clear, grace-filled, truthful encounters. As followers of Jesus, we have many things to offer our clients, not the least of which is excellent customer service.



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