

Minutes matter: make the most of those first few precious moments

Here are some ideas to aid you and your trainers in guiding your agents in success when they begin a telephone conversation. Diane Banister, of Intelligent Dialogue, begins with her 60-second rule....

MY HUSBAND and I have a 60-second rule for restaurants. If, within a minute of walking in, we haven't been smiled at, acknowledged, greeted or shown to a table, then we leave. When we have deviated from this rule we've had some of the worst food, service and nights out of our lives. But that's another article for another magazine....

Our 60-second minute restaurant decider demonstrates how fast, as customers, we make up our minds. It's the same on the phone. Whether the call is inbound or outbound, we decide quickly whether we want to do business with the person on the line.

The telephone affects communication. One of the differences is that we have no visual cues, no body language on which to base our opinions. It is, of course, possible to "hear" a smile or a slouch in someone's voice, but the reality is that we pay more attention to tone on the phone than if we were face to face. Words take on more significance over the telephone, and can become triggers for customers especially in those first few precious moments, when both parties are "sussing each other out".

Here are my top tips on how to guide your agents in creating the right first impression on

the telephone. I suggest that you pass them to your trainer/s.

Inbound

It's important to remember that customers may have already been interacting with their telephone key pad, and pre-recorded messages, so some of the initial impression may be out of the hands of your agents. So the key moment is when the speaking starts. Engage the caller and get them on side:

Be positive and confident The opening of a call will create a positive or negative first impression, so make sure the greeting is spoken with confidence and energy. Start each call by using the greeting to focus your attention away from your current activity to the caller you are about to speak to.

"Shake hands" with the caller Not every script or system allows for it, which is a shame because a verbal handshake makes a huge difference. Ask for the caller's name, and introduce yourself:

"Who am I speaking to, please?"

"Daniel Craig" (Allow me a moment of weakness here!)

"Hi Daniel, I'm Diane. How can I help you today?"

Bridge, bridge, bridge This is a great technique for connecting with the caller, especially when they are unhappy, and helps you to avoid the dark forces of your computer system.

Let me explain what I mean by this. Step for one moment, if you will, into the customer's shoes. You are calling for the fifth time about an issue that hasn't been resolved and the call starts just the same as the previous four. Something like this:

"Good morning, ABC company, Dan speaking. How can I help?"

"Good morning, Dan. I really hope you can help. I am very unhappy because this is the fifth call I've made this week about this issue and nothing has been sorted out"

"What's your account number, please?"

Did you see the dark forces of the computer system take over there? In that moment, the agent knows that they need to check the account history to see how to help. But what does the customer hear?

"What's your account number please" In other words, not *"What is your name. Let's talk person to person and sort this out"* but *"What number are you?"* How does that help the customer relationship? How does that make the customer feel? Here's where the bridge comes in. This is how the call could start:

"Good morning, ABC company, Dan speaking. How can I help?"

"Good morning, Dan. I really hope you can help. I am very unhappy because this is the fifth call I've made this week about this issue and nothing has been sorted out"

"I'm sorry to hear that. First of all, my name is Dan. Can I take your name please?"

"Yes, it's Diane Craig" (well, we can all dream!)

"OK, Diane, let me see how I can help you with this. Do you have your account number to hand and then I can have a look at your account history and see how I can best help you today?"

Just a few extra words, but a huge difference to the customer because your focus is on them and your conversation and not your computer screen.

Outbound

Most people agree that making outbound calls is a tough job. We all experience sales calls as potential customers and the calls that we get often create the wrong impression – especially in

A verbal handshake makes a huge difference



the first few seconds – and cause us to hang up or to give the caller a tough time. Those first moments are make or break, and the wrong first impression immediately puts the customer or the prospect off side.

The key with outbound calls is to develop the call map (not script) and the skills so that you are able to have a conversation that you feel comfortable having, and your prospects are happy to be on the receiving end:

Some of the big mistakes are:

Mispronouncing the customer's name, as in "Is that Mrs Cray-Ig?" (instead of Craig), which puts the prospect or customer off side immediately. If you do mispronounce their name – which can happen when your outbound calls are delivered to you – apologise, ask them how to pronounce it properly, tell them you want to get it right, and make a note in your system on how to say it phonetically, so that you or a colleague gets it right next time.

Speaking very quickly This often happens when people are asked to make outbound calls and haven't been fully trained, or when sales are slow and the temptation is to get everyone on the phones calling customers.

Imagine if you see the person of your dreams at a party. Do you walk up and tell them how fantastic you are, and what an opportunity they are missing?

of your dreams across the room at a party. Do you walk up to them and talk at them, telling them how fantastic you are, what an opportunity they are missing out on? Would that strike up a conversation or is the person of your dreams likely to run for cover? The same applies to the telephone. Will saying how fantastic your company is really engage the prospect who has no relationship with you and who may have just been settling down to something important in their lives?

The good news is that all of these are very easy to overcome. So, when making outbound calls:

1 Be positive, clear and confident Be very clear what your opening lines are going to be. The great thing about this is that you have time to prepare them, test them, amend them and reach a definitive for what will work for you. They should



"I am very unhappy because this is the fifth call I've made this week about this issue"

include your name, your company and the reason for your call, such as:

"Hi, Diane, my name's Daniel Craig. I'm from Safebank and I'm calling to see if you would be interested in a special offer we have today."

If your company is not a household name, you may need to include a benefit statement to describe your company. This needs to be simple, effective, and explain very clearly what you can do for your prospect. It will vary and be specific to any campaign you are running. See the difference between:

"Hi, my name is Diane Banister, from Intelligent Dialogue. Have you heard of us?"

"No"
"Well we are a training company who specialise in sales training"

What about:

"Well, we are a training company that helps our clients get great results in winning new business"

And even if they say they have heard of you, it is an opportunity to say:

"You'll know then that we are a training company which helps our clients to get great results in customer service"

2 Always give your surname What do we think when we get a call from someone we've never heard of who introduces themselves as Bill or Tina, from XYZ company? We think it's a sales call. Our brain thinks of all the other sales calls that we've had which are bad or mediocre and puts that call in with those. Objections come fast and early.

What do we think when someone gives their surname as well? We're programmed to think they are important, they have authority, and so you'll find by giving a surname, your agent's call will have more credibility, and prospects will be

more likely to listen.

It's a simple thing, but right from the beginning you are signalling that you are different; you are better than all the other mediocre sales calls they receive.

3 Get a question in early The most important thing in starting an outbound sales call, is to get the conversation connecting as early as possible. You can only do this with a question.

If you start to bombard the person you are calling with a scripted message it just becomes sales spiel, it says loud and clear you have no interest in that person as a customer or a prospect because you are talking at them not with them.

This is your secret weapon: remember that the person asking the questions is the person in control of the call. And it gets better: the person creating the right first impressions and asking the right questions can lead the call anywhere you want it to go.

Whether you work in inbound or outbound, creating the right first impression has another essential purpose. It gives you confidence. If calls go wrong, you often start on the wrong foot. If you start well, you can build and get the right outcome in the call, right for the customer, right for you.

Profile



Diane Banister the managing director of Intelligent Dialogue. She will send more information on creating the right approaches and dialogues to have with customers, inbound or outbound, to readers who contact her at:

diane@intelligentdialogue.co.uk
www.intelligentdialogue.co.uk