
Getting Out Of The Phone Loop: Making It Easy For Customers To Conduct Business With You

by LAURIE BROWN

Barbara was thrilled. She finally got a brand new automated phone system for her business. She purchased the system to give her employees more time for their work. It seemed to her that too much of their time was taken up transferring calls to the “right” person and repeatedly giving out information about their hours or location. The automated system would allow them to become truly productive.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Wrong. It was a nightmare. Her customers, who were used to speaking to a human, now had to maneuver a difficult, confusing and sometimes truly impossible system. Some of her customers dealt with the new system, but silently hated it. Some of them complained. Others just gave up and went elsewhere. The real problem was that Barbara lost track of what really mattered. She forgot that her customers were not in the way of her business — they were her business. In her effort to make it easier for her employees, she inadvertently made it more difficult for her customers to do business with her.

In a marketplace with so many choices, it is essential for you to do everything possible to make it easy for your customers to conduct business with you. Any difficulty or obstacle that hinders or frustrates them may make them run away from you without you ever having a chance to “make things right.” So what can you do to encourage your customers to remain your customers and not drive them to your competitor?

- **Make it easy to contact your company.** Have your phone number clearly displayed on everything: all printed and electronic media, receipts, your e-mail signature line, on magnets, notepads and anything else your customers

may keep. List your phone information in online directories, yellow pages, etc.

Some other things that make contacting your company easy are a toll-free number to make it affordable for your customers to

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contact you at any time, if you use phone words, include both the spelling and the numeric equivalent.

- **Make it easy to talk to a human.** Don't make your customers search for a method to talk to a living, breathing person. If you have an automated phone system, it can be extremely frustrating and impossible to get in touch with a human being. Consider reducing the number of prompts in

your system. One set of prompts is the limit for most people's patience and goodwill. If you absolutely, positively must have more than one set of prompts, make sure to offer your customers the option of speaking to an operator in the first and subsequent series of prompts.

- **Make it easy for your customer to reach the person they need.** Have employees take ownership of every call. If they can answer a question without transferring, have them go ahead and answer. If the caller needs to talk to someone else in the company, have the person who has answered the call tell the customer that they are going to be transferred, making sure they have given the caller the correct number in the event the caller gets disconnected or "lost" in the system. If at all possible, try

to get a system that allows your employees to stay on the phone with the customer until the transfer is made.

As in any other business situation, have the employee introduce the caller to the person they are being transferred to. The employee should provide a brief recap of the customer's needs and or questions before politely saying goodbye to the customer.

- **Make it easy to be on hold.** Thirty seconds doesn't sound so bad, does it? Phone time is different than regular time. When you are waiting for someone to help you, 30 seconds can seem like an eternity. If your people have to place a caller on hold, make sure that they check back every 30 seconds to update the customer and/or give them the option of being called back. Don't ask the customer to call back, instead offer to call them back. Calling back your customer is a way of acknowledging that you know their time is important and you appreciate their patience.

If you use music for the on-hold time, make sure that it is consistent with the image of your business. A better idea is to play information tapes that tell your customer about your business or give them some ideas to improve their life or business.

- **Make it easy to have a voice mail returned.** If a customer leaves a voice mail message, they expect to get a call back quickly. Have your employees change their voice mail message each day. If they need to be out of the office, or if they are unable to return messages that day, their message should not only indicate that, but should also have the number or extension of a person who could be contacted immediately.



"Don't put me on hold! If I wanted to hear boring music, I wouldn't call — I'd take the elevator."

Sometimes (often) we are unaware of just how difficult and frustrating it can be to talk to a human at our own business. If you think you have an easy system, try it out yourself. Have friends and family members try it. Ask your employees to give it a try. Have them tell you what the easiest part of their experience was, as well as which parts were frustrating. Then fix the problems immediately. Make it as easy as possible for your customers to do business with you. □

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