

UPGRADE YOUR PHONE SKILLS!

I can't believe this is still happening. As sales professionals we spend a great deal of our time leaving messages for colleagues, clients and prospects yet the vast majority of sales people have terrible telephone phone skills. Thirty years ago, before I entered a career in sales, I worked as a radio broadcaster. What I learned in radio has played a key role in my presentation skills and sales success.

You may think the radio announcers you listen to on a daily basis are amazing at what is called the "Ad Lib" in the business. Most of them aren't. What they are is professional, creative, funny and most importantly prepared. Many top morning shows have professional writers who are behind the scenes feeding material to the 'on air talent' as the show progresses. Others spend hours researching current events and planning what will be included in the daily show.

So what does this all have to do with sales? It impacts a number of career critical elements. Every day I see sales people attempting to "wing-it" in front of customers, on the phone, or during demonstrations. This is a sure way to remain part of the 80 per cent of the sales representatives who are just getting by instead of joining the 20 per cent who are the top performers.

The telephone impacts our professional lives on a daily basis but for the sake of this article I am going to focus on the basics skills that every sales professional needs. If you have poor telephone skills you are going to suffer and never make it to the next stage in the customers buying cycle.

There are many good books on telephone manners so I am not going to go into information on smiling while talking, not chewing food or gum, keep a mirror in front of your phone or the best time to make those calls. I would rather address where the real problems lie.

Most sales people do a very good job of speaking directly with a customer or prospect, where they fall apart is when they encounter a gatekeeper or voice mail. Here is a list of never fail me tips.

- When you get a gatekeeper, never start a call by saying; "Hi Carol, how are you today?" I have spoken to so many executive assistants at the C-level who say the minute they hear those words they know a sales rep is making a prospecting call. If the person calling the C- executive knows the gatekeeper they are going to quickly identify themselves and ask for their associate. They know Carol is extremely busy and will not waste her time. However if she starts a conversation you can follow her lead. If you don't know the executive or gatekeeper then simply say, "Hello Carol. Is Bill Smith available? It's Bob Weese calling from B2B Sales Connections." Simple direct and accurate. We can leave gatekeeper sales strategy for another time.
- Oops you've got voice mail! If this is not a prospecting call, if you have questions for your client, information or have agreed to follow-up on a specific point and they are not available then you must have a plan ready for voice mail. If you hum, haw and ramble you are most likely going to have your message deleted before they ever listen through to the painful end. You are lucky if you get 15 seconds before the delete key is pressed and you are left wondering why the client never called you back.
- The best format is to pre-plan your voice mail as a 15-second information package just like a commercial. Give your name and phone number off the top so they can write it down immediately. Secondly, use a little good news or a benefit statement to get them interested. Fred, its Bob Weese calling from B2B Sales Connections. My number is xxx-xxx-xx,xx. Great news. We have enough widgets in stock to fill your order if we get it in today. Give me a call and we can start the process. My number is XXX-XXX-XX,XX. Again, that's XXX-XXX-XX,XX."



- Now let's take a moment and address the problem with sales people leaving phone messages. Speed, clarity, rhythm. I get too many messages on blurted out so fast I can't understand the phone number even when I replay the message a few times. If that's your prospect they have hit the delete key and are thinking you will call him back if it's important. When it comes time to say your phone number pause for a beat or two and then slowly and clearly give your number and then just like those radio and TV announcers repeat the number again. To ensure you are saying the number slowly, write it down as you say it. I have listened to sales people ramble on for more than a minute in a disjointed uninteresting message only to fire out their phone number as quickly as humanly possible. Oops, I lost interest and hit the delete key before you finished.
- Regardless of how well you know the person at the other end, leave a call back phone number. I hear from sales rep's all the time. They say; "I don't need to leave a number they can see it on the phone display and just hit redial". Sorry folks it doesn't work that way. They may have pulled messages from a different phone, it may come in on VoIP, and your number may be buried on their desk, in a file or well out of reach. When this happens you have now dropped from an immediate action item to a "get around to it". Make it easy for your clients and always leave a number.
- Here's a real quick business killer. Empty your voice mailbox. Nothing will kill your sales momentum like a customer getting the message, "this mailbox is full, goodbye".
- Finally I would like to address calling from your mobile to discuss a major issue. Face the facts landlines are almost 100 per cent crystal clear while mobile and portable phones can range from good to "I could do better with two tin cans and a string". If you are calling to discuss an important issue or concern, don't try and carry on the conversation while either you or your customer is in traffic heading home or to an appointment. Save the important calls for a time when you can focus 100 per cent on the customer and the message.

In broadcasting we used "talk tapes" which recorded everything you said on air. This was a quick way to find out how your presentations sounded. You can create your own "talk tapes" either by recording some of your calls or asking your manager or co-worker to listen in on a few of your telephone calls and provide you with feedback. You will be amazed at how you sounded versus how you thought you sounded.

Good Selling!

Robert J. Weese
B2B Sales Connections Inc.

Robert is a managing partner in B2B Sales Connections Inc. He is a former broadcaster with over 25 years of experience in B2B sales, including extensive knowledge in direct mail and telesales. He has a proven track record of developing revenue-generating services for B2B sales organizations looking to improve their revenues through client focused sales training, presentation skills, sales recruiting and marketing programs. For more information, please visit www.b2bsalesconnections.com, or contact Robert directly at rjweese@b2bsalesconnections.com.