

DON'T FORGET TO CALL HOME

By: Robert Sher

A friend of mine recently lost his bags while traveling on a major airline carrier. The phone was busy when he called the baggage claim phone number listed on the company's web site. When he finally got through, the call went directly into voice mail.

"If I have to travel and it is less than eight hours away by car, I am driving from now on," he told me.

Is that the message you want your customers taking home? Well, then it is time to brush up on some good old fashioned phone etiquette. The telephone is the entrance to your business house and, if it is broken down, people (employees and customers alike) will think you are not doing your job.

In these challenging times, it is more important than ever to keep customers happy and to market your unique brand. When you or your employees lack basic phone skills (or you rely on voice mail to do your job), you risk destroying your unique brand.

I'll admit it can be annoying when I am boarding a plane and my cell phone rings, even when it is someone whose call I want to take, but I try hard not to be rude and, if I can do it, I always pick it up and politely say I will call back and I give a time frame for doing so.

Look at it this way: When your phone rings, your pay check is calling. No matter who is on the other end of the line, each call can be viewed as an opportunity to reinforce your brand. This attitude can and will give you the tools to inspire others and, ultimately, secure more business.

It really is that simple. You might say in your marketing materials your customer is No. 1 but, if your customer can never get someone to answer the phone or gets someone rude or uninterested on the other end, you are sending the wrong message. You are off brand.

How do you get back on brand? Every time you pick up the phone or place a call, remember the person on the other end of the line will develop a perception of you within 30 seconds. There is not a lot of wiggle room here so you'd best be on brand.

Here are some tips for phone etiquette:

- Identify yourself with full name and function or the name of the company. Follow it up with something like, "How may I help you today?"

- Be warm and enthusiastic. Never say “I don’t know” or “That is not my job.” Try saying “Let me find out about that for you.”
- Return all calls you miss within one business day.
- Turn off your cell phone or PDA during meetings. Do not use the cell phone to surf the Internet or text message someone else while you are in a meeting – social or business.
- Avoid slang.
- If you are not hosting a conference call, avoid that speaker phone button. It leaves the impression you are not fully concentrating on the caller on the other end of the line.
- Train everyone at work to answer the phone the same way.
- Periodically I always called my office to hear what the public heard when the phone was answered. So don’t forget to call home.

Robert Sher, CPA, is a Certified Executive Coach. Formerly CFO and partner for Schostak Brothers & Company, Sher has been a delegate from the Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants to the National Future Forum working on the CPA “Vision” Project. Sher serves on the boards of numerous charitable and professional organizations as well as being on the West Bloomfield Township Board of Trustees and Treasurer of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants Foundation.