

# Bad phone manners fail to ring in new business

May is not just a spring month. The etiquette police want you to know that although this is the land of the free and you can do just about anything you want, you may not be allowed to, unless you say: "Secretary, may I?" "May I please speak to Miss Manners?" "May I take a message?"

My father told us endlessly, "No, you cannot hit him back, but you may hit his front." Good grammar is proper etiquette, and it needs practice. The first or only contact with a client could be by telephone, and that first impression should sound intelligent. Don't say, "This is me." Say, "This is she."

Many people start work before 9 in the morning and finish after 5, and chances are they make telephone calls. But have you ever noticed that around 8 a.m. most switchboards are closed? If an employee who has not been properly trained in telephone etiquette happens to get hold of an eager new client who just saw your company ad in the morning paper, the following may occur:

"Hello."  
"Hello? Have I reached Polite Inc.?"  
"Yeah, but I'm in accounting, and the secretaries don't come in 'til 9. You'll have to call back."

"This is Mrs. Interested. Is Mr. Seller at this location?"

"Yeah."  
"Would you please see if he's in or transfer my call? It is important that I speak to him."

"Well, it's three floors up and the elevator isn't on, and the switchboard doesn't open until 9 a.m. ..."

Wrong answer.  
I'll bet many of you have had an interesting opposite experience where the president of the company answers the call, personally, at 7 a.m., often on the first ring, and (I will add to the pot) that you have not forgotten your surprise. Why?

I am not necessarily advocating the longer workday, but I do think it is only common sense to realize that the nerves of your company are exposed when that receptionist is not protecting your communication lifeline.

Everyone in the organization should be able to answer a telephone and take messages correctly. Even CEOs.

For example, start with the company name: "Good morning, Lightning Bolt Fabrics." Then add, "How may I help you?" and wait for an answer.



## BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

Marilynn Mendell

It would be courteous to give your name and try to respond effectively to the request such as "Yes, this is Mr. White, and I will be happy to have Mr. People call you right back. May I have your telephone number, please? And would you spell your name for me, please? Thank you. Goodbye." It is necessary to complete a telephone call with a farewell ending—don't just hang up.

Sometimes the switchboard operator answers, "Impolite Incorporated" and automatically pushes the hold button. To assume your caller has nothing better to do than listen to your choice of music is rude.

Telephones should be answered this way: "Good morning, Polite Incorporated. Can you please hold?" Then wait for the answer to your question. If you hear "No, I can't," then ask if you may take a message. (Otherwise a person could fall into a coma and be found days later still clutching the telephone that is blasting Mozart).

The best receptionist returns to the caller every 30 seconds and asks if the client wishes to continue holding.

If someone comes into the office while you are on the telephone, wait for a break in the discussion and ask your caller if they would mind holding for a minute while you

answer an urgent problem. Then put that person on hold, or cover the receiver and talk softly and conduct the interruption as quickly as possible.

A word or two about names. Know the first and last name of the person you are calling, how to spell them correctly and how to pronounce them. If you're not sure before calling, say so when you reach your party, and ask for the proper pronunciation

and spelling. Or call the receptionist with a pretend name of your own, and then call again later if you are too embarrassed to ask the person yourself.

I recently had a cold call from a nice young lady who wanted to sell her product to me. After talking for a while, she asked if I made anything besides turkey. Since I've been called Marilyn Turkey more than once, I immediately realized where her mix-up was, and we had a good laugh—but she didn't sell me anything.

It's also important to know when to use the familiar or the formal address. Unless the client asks to be called by their first name, call them "lady for dinner" before using the familiar. While the intention is to project friendliness, to a stranger it can actually be seen as disrespect.

Indiscretion when answering calls can

create several problems. To prevent such mishaps, if the boss is nearby and it is not clear whether he wishes to speak to the caller or not, repeat the caller's name as though you are trying to be clear and look at your leader for "yes" or "no" head shake. If "no," the polite response would be to say, "I'm sorry, but Mr. Noodle is in a meeting at the moment. May I take a message and have him return your call later?"

Finally, what really riles the etiquette police is gum chewing while talking on the telephone. Until a recent telephone conversation, I had assumed that mentioning any thing so basic would be an insulting statement of the obvious. I retract that thought. Beware, the ears of etiquette are upon you.

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