

BEGIN RIGHT...STAY RIGHT

Tips on Telephone Tone and Service Etiquette



BRITE NEWSLETTER | BRITE@MEDNET.UCLA.EDU | 310-794-6281

Imagine the following ad being placed in the Sunday Los Angeles Times in hopes of filling an opening in your department:

Seeking healthcare professional that is tired, bored, unenthusiastic, apathetic and conveys an overall disinterest during the greater part of the day.

It is unlikely that any of us would want our department to consider placing this type of want ad, and even less likely that we would want someone hired who actually responded to it. It is likely, however, that you have encountered a telephone service representative with these characteristics when calling a clinic, hospital, or vendor. Maybe you were greeted by a voice that seemed completely apathetic and disinterested. Without seeing the facial expressions of the person on the other end of the phone, you conclude, by their tone of voice, whether they are going to be helpful or not. Our calling customers are also very good at picking up on these verbal cues, and within the first few seconds of the telephone conversation, they determine if the service representative is friendly, enthusiastic, empathetic, or caring, all by the voice tone. Your voice tone determines whether the caller will have a positive or negative experience. And if your caller has a negative experience, you will have to work harder at building their confidence and trust in you to do your job.

THE POWER OF VOICE TONE

According to studies that measure the percentage of how we communicate, our voice tone is over *five times* more important than the words we use when communicating over the phone. Since we cannot use our body language such as eye contact, physical gestures, or facial expressions, we lose 55% of our communication ability. Simply put, when we're on the phone with a customer, our voice tone is really all that we have to make a positive impression.

There is also another voice tone that is rarely addressed that could negatively influence how our customers perceive us. This is the dreaded *neutral* voice tone, and when used over the phone, it could have very negative consequences.

NEUTRAL TONE = NEGATIVE TONE?

So, what's so bad about a neutral voice tone? It doesn't mean that an employee is

necessarily being negative, does it? Actually, to many customers, a neutral tone of voice is just as bad as a negative one—regardless of whether the neutral tone is intentional or not. Many customers perceive it to be a sign of indifference or boredom, which will likely anger them. It is up to us to ensure that we pay attention to the tone of our voices when we speak to our customers to ensure that something neutral doesn't turn into something negative.

STATISTICS TELL THE STORY

According to a recent study conducted by AMDOCS, 80% of today's consumers would rather sit in a traffic jam or pay their taxes rather than deal with an unhelpful employee. On the inside, the perceived "unhelpful" employee could very well be a helpful employee but their neutral voice tone often leads customers to believe something entirely different. Customers typically conclude that the employee is:

- **Bored**—thinking, "I really wish that I didn't have to talk to you. There are a million other things that I'd rather be doing right now."
- **Indifferent**—thinking, "You think you have problems? This is nothing compared to the last customer I just talked to."
- **Detached**—thinking, "Yeah, whatever. You are the 27th customer today alone that has called in with this concern."
- **Tired**—thinking, "It's been a long day, and I just want my shift to end so I can go home."

These attitudes are definitely not what we want to display to our customers over the telephone or anytime we interact. It is important to remember the impression that we leave with our customers begins with our tone of voice, and "not being negative" isn't a good enough effort. To achieve our organizational goals of becoming a *great* place to work, practice medicine, and receive care, we must pay attention to every service detail during every customer interaction—the reward is well worth the effort. Having happier customers means that our jobs will be easier, so we will be happier, which ultimately is a win-win for everyone. And when speaking to customers over the telephone, it all begins with a positive tone of voice!

☆ MAKE A DIFFERENCE WITH THESE THREE TECHNIQUES ☆

1) Use a Welcoming Greeting

This is your chance to make a positive first impression and to start the conversation on the right foot. If you answer the phone in a short/unfriendly manner, let's say for example that you answer saying, "Oncology Department" chances are that the caller will become short or unfriendly with you too. On the other hand, if you answer the phone in a pleasant and friendly manner, saying "Good afternoon, Oncology Dept, this is (your name), how may I help you?" it is much more likely that caller will respond back to you in a friendly manner as well. A pleasant greeting only takes a small amount of time but it can make a HUGE difference in creating a positive experience for your customers.

2) ASK to Place the Caller on Hold and WAIT for a Response

When it is necessary to place a customer on hold, it is important to always ask the customer, "May I place you on hold please?" and then *wait* to hear the response before you take any action. If you hear no response, ask again. Then thank the caller and press the HOLD button. Placing a customer on hold without asking for permission, or even worse, asking for permission and not waiting to hear the answer, shows a lack of respect. When you actively listen for a reply and then respond in a polite manner, you are on your way to building rapport and trust.

3) Be Informative when Transferring Calls

When you discover that a customer will need to speak to a different department or person in order to receive proper service, always explain to the customer why it is necessary to transfer the call. Include who (name/dept.) you are transferring to and the telephone number of the new location. It is good practice to provide the caller with the phone number to ensure that they will be able to call the department directly in the future.

TELEPHONE ETIQUETTE QUICK REFERENCE

-  **Answer Promptly**—best practice standard is by the third ring.
-  **Give Caller Your Full Attention**—Before picking up the receiver discontinue any other conversation or activity.
-  **Speak Clearly and Put a Smile in Your Voice**—Speak clearly and distinctly in a pleasant tone of voice. Do not eat, chew gum, or have anything in your mouth that may obstruct your ability to communicate effectively.
-  **Be Respectful**—Ask the caller if you may place them on hold and then wait for a response. Use the **Hold** button when leaving the line so that the caller does not hear any background noise or conversations being held nearby.
-  **Be Helpful**—If the caller has reached the wrong department, kindly offer assistance. Sometimes customers have been transferred to numerous departments. Attempt to find out where their call should be directed to, use your resources such as the Campus Directory to locate a number, and then offer to redirect their call; they will greatly appreciate it.
-  **Be Courteous**— Remember to say “please” and “thank you” regularly. It seems simple but these very positive words are commonly underutilized so use them frequently to create a positive customer experience.
-  **Make a Lasting Positive Impression**—Remember that you represent UCLA Health System, your department, and your peers. The first impression you make will stay with the caller long after your call is completed.

SOME DO'S AND DON'TS OF WHAT TO SAY

To avoid sounding negative or abrupt over the phone, the following responses in the table below should be used both to protect the privacy of the office staff and to give a more tactful response:

DO'S	DON'TS
☺ "May I put you on hold please?...Thank you."	☹ "Hang on." or "Just a second." or "Please hold."
☺ "(Name) has stepped out of the office. Would you like to leave a message on his/her voicemail?"	☹ "I don't know where he/she is."
☺ "I'm having a little difficulty hearing you. Could you please speak up?"	☹ "I can't hear you—speak up."
☺ "I need to transfer your call to (dept.) so that they can answer your question. May I transfer you?"	☹ "I can't help you. You need to speak to someone else."
☺ "(Name) is out of the office for the day. Can I help you with something or would you like his/her voicemail?"	☹ "She took the day off."
☺ "May I ask who is calling please?"	☹ "Who is this?"
☺ "She/He is unavailable at the moment. Would you like to leave a message on her/his voicemail?"	☹ "She is busy right now."