

Phone Skills Still Vital for Business Success (Part I)

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It's easy to tell confident business people when you meet them: Good posture, firm handshakes, direct eye contact and a powerful aura. While confidence is just as important to portray over the phone for business success, it's done differently and can be more difficult to attain for many people.

Furthermore, the widespread use of e-mail has caused many individuals to forget the importance of good telephone skills and many companies to abandon skills training. They are more apt to think it's not essential for the few times they may have to "sell" on the phone. How wrong they are! One missed or botched sale is far too many!

Others fall into the same syndrome I find when teaching business writing: I know how to use a pencil; therefore, I can write, i.e. I know how to talk; hence, I know how to communicate verbally on the phone.

Read on ... if you want to enhance your telephone effectiveness.

- Since your vocal components convey more than 80 percent of your message over the phone, you need to be particularly aware of your tone, rate, volume, pitch and inflection. Your words account for less than 20 percent.
- Since women typically have a naturally higher-pitched voice than men, you benefit from saying "low, low" before you pick up and say "hello." It helps eliminate that high-pitched "Hi."
- Stand up when you want to project more authority. Height is power, and the difference is noticeable even on the phone.
- Keep your lips ½ to 1 inch from the mouthpiece and speak directly into it. You lose 70 percent of your volume when you allow the phone to slip below your chin.
- Don't balance the phone between your ear and shoulder for a protracted period. You strain your vocal cords and speak out of the side of your mouth. This becomes apparent to the other person in a longer conversation. A headset is preferable if you need to take lengthy notes.
- Vary your tone. Guard against the boredom that creeps in because you can't see the person or because they are droning on (or so it appears to you). Pretend you **can** see each other to keep you on your toes.
- Keep your rate in check. Don't speak so quickly that the person on the other end thinks you have to rush off to something more important ... or s/he simply can't keep up with your thoughts. Conversely, don't move so slowly that the other person resorts to playing computer solitaire to stay entertained.
- Put a smile in your voice **before** you pick up the phone and keep a mirror near by to keep the smile there. Your attitude "shows" in your voice.
- Sit or stand up straight like the John Hancock Building. Your voice was meant to project in this manner, not like it is emanating from a pretzel.

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- Also project your voice by breathing from your diaphragm, not through your lungs. When you breathe through your lungs only, you run out of breath and sound as if you are out of energy and, certainly, enthusiasm.
- Avoid negative emotional carryover from a previous call. If you are making another call, clear your head by taking a walk or getting a drink of water. If the call is coming in to you, either let voice mail pick up the message or take a deep breath and use the power of positive thinking to clear your mind quickly.
- When you initiate the call
 - Ask if this is a good time to talk.
 - Be prepared. Clearly state your purpose and have all backup materials handy. Take notes as needed.
 - Make sure your equipment is operational and professional. Don't call on a cell phone if you are in danger of losing the signal. This indicates lack of preparedness on your part.
- Close the conversation with a summary, follow up plans (if appropriate), and a "thank you" for time spent.

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Lillian D. Bjorseth uses her infectious enthusiasm and her practical, insightful and pertinent content to help you learn and grow on the spot and throughout your life. She's a people-skills speaker, trainer, consultant and prolific author. A graduate of the prestigious University of Missouri School of Journalism, she's also a member of National Speakers Association. Her Fortune 100 experience includes more than 10 years at AT&T where she trained top executives in media and communication skills. lillianspeaks@duoforce.com, www.duoforce.com, or 630-983-5308.

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