

White Paper

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Here’s the situation: You take the time to get in your car to drive to a company where you do business. It could be any company: a retail store, a restaurant, a gym, a vendor, etc. You walk in the door and up to the counter or receptionist’s desk. No one is in front of you, so you think this is going to be a quick transaction. Then, as you start explaining to the person behind the counter why you are there, the phone rings. The individual serving you holds up a finger to you as a gesture to say, “Hold on,” and then proceeds to answer the phone. You wait there, looking around at the signs hanging on the wall or the plaques on the shelves while the person on the phone gets through his/her entire litany. When they are finally finished, then – and only then – can you complete your introduction and your business...unless, of course, the phone rings again.

If you think about it, this is exactly like other “cuts” we experience in life. What do we do when someone cuts in line in front of us? We become indignant and most likely will say something to that person to get them to go to the back of the line where they belong. What do we do when someone cuts us off on the road? We honk our horn and maybe make a gesture of frustration. Someone cutting in line or cutting us off on the road is insensitive, unfair and just wrong in our culture, and so we react to it. But yet, even if we’re seething inside, for some reason we stand there and take the phone cut-offs without even a squeak.

Why don’t we say anything in this situation? One reason could be that the “interrupter” is not physically present. If we tried to grab the phone from the customer service representative to express our displeasure to the person on the other end of the phone, it would be more of a spectacle than a justified reaction, and people would probably look at us like we were a few cards shy of a full deck. We could tell the receptionist or cashier directly that we are unhappy with the brush off, which would be more appropriate than the first scenario. However, we might not want to risk upsetting the person who stands between us and what we wanted at that business in the first place by questioning his/her customer service skills. Besides, that would take more time, and we’ve already waited through an annoying phone call.

Why is it that someone who is sitting at home pushing buttons so often gets priority service over the person who has taken the extra time and energy to do business in person? Companies that condone this tactic might excuse the behavior by rationalizing that the person calling on the phone is potential business, too, and if you don't answer the phone you might lose the business. While this is understandable - and we might even forgive the behavior for this reason - it doesn't change the fact that being preempted by a phone call is just downright rude. We should be basking in the glow of incredible customer service, not being forced to forgive poor customer service.

Companies have a dilemma, then. How do you handle serving customers and answering the phone, particularly when they coincide? Below are a few suggestions in order of the quality of customer service.

Hire someone to answer the phone:

If the company has the means and a large volume of phone calls, hiring someone to do nothing but answer the phone is the solution. This employee could be considered the off-site customer assistant. He/she could also be in charge of responding to inquiries sent in via e-mail. If this isn't enough work to keep that person busy, then some clerical tasks could be added to their job description.

Give the task of answering phones to someone else in the company:

Is there someone else in the company who has the people skills and knowledge to answer phones? Then let the front desk employee handle the in-person customers, and the other employee "in the back" answer the company phone calls. This would work better in a situation where the phone calls are not so numerous that it would be a detriment to that other person getting his/her own work done.

Have a back-up phone answering process:

Keep the front desk employee as the initial contact by phone or person. However, if the front desk person has a customer walk in and then the phone rings, have a process in place that after two or three rings, the phone forwards to someone else in the company. This back-up customer representative would have to have people skills, the information necessary, and to be at his/her desk most of the time, so choose the person wisely.

Have an automated phone system that allows for the caller to be put on hold until the employee can answer it:

This suggestion would only work well if the in-person customer service being offered is the type that will be completed quickly. Keeping people on hold too long is dangerous because yes, you absolutely might lose the business. That is poor customer service, too. If the front desk employee can be guaranteed to get to the phone without too much of a delay, this could be a viable option.

Have an electronic system that allows the caller to leave a message:

When the front desk employee is with a real live customer and the phone rings, have a system set up that prompts the caller to leave a message and promises a return call within a certain amount of time. If a company chooses this route, then they have to commit to responding to the messages in an extremely timely fashion. Most people don't mind leaving messages if they know they will get a response. Build a reputation for terrific customer service, which includes prompt return phone calls, then this avenue might be effective.

(It is important to note the difference between the phone cut-off and the scenario in which a customer walks in and the front desk employee is already on the phone. As long as the representative can get off the phone in a reasonable amount of time, this circumstance isn't nearly as irritating. We generally understand if the customer service representative has answered a phone when we hadn't yet arrived.)

If you value quality customer service, look a little deeper in your organization. Are your customer service representatives cutting people off by answering the phone in front of them? Ratchet up the quality of your customer service by choosing one of the options above. Your walk-in customers and phone customers will get the undivided attention that they expect from a quality establishment, and that they deserve simply because they are human beings.