

When is the first time that your business gives an idea of who you are to potential clients or customers? I say one important way is the telephone.

We all use phones, but many don't know the most efficient and appropriate procedures for using this instrument as a marketing tool. If you are a sole proprietorship and the only individual who answers the telephone, use it as an advertisement. Whether voice mail or an answering machine, have your message state who you are, what you do and who you do it for.

Let people know how to contact you. You can provide your fax number, your pager, your cell phone, even your online address as a method for communication.

If someone else answers your telephone, be sure that the method used represents how you want the world to view you. The old ways no longer apply, especially if you (we all are) are a service provider. The first contact someone has with your office must be impeccable.

The voice should be friendly and the responses should be professional. Whatever your business provides, be it service or manufacturing, it's all about sales. Every phone call is a sales opportunity.

Some attorneys and doctors have their phones answered by label, ie, "Doctor's office" or by the telephone number, "421-3456". Not a user friendly technique and no one may want to buy your service. Then you're put on hold without even knowing why!

No one should be put on hold unless they give permission. I know, sounds a little farfetched to ask a caller if they are able to hold, but it's vital. When someone says to me "Please hold", they are not creating a relationship, they are ordering me to do something I may not be able to do.

On the other hand, if someone says, "Are you able to hold?", you have a choice. Say yes and it's difficult to complain about being on hold unless you go into what I call "Ignore". That's after a minute. I won't hold longer than a minute without someone getting back to me.

If you say no, you can't hold, you remain in charge of your time and environment. You can then choose to call back when it works for you.

It's also quite acceptable for a receptionist to ask a customer if they can be called back. This avoids 'Hold Hell' and the caller feels taken care of.

Don't be afraid to change your message frequently. Some people change messages daily, others have a different routine. Your voice needs to be energetic and you have to hear that smile. So, get a mirror, place it on your desk, take a deep breath, smile and then pick up the telephone.

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