

Practicing the ten tele-commandments will bring blessings to your business

By *Connie Evener*

Dial the numbers of your top three competitors, plus your own - incognito, of course. Which of the responses sounds the most warm and friendly, yet professional? Is it the miniature golf course, the kids' pizza parlor/fun center, the bowling alley or your skating center? Which would you - as a potential customer - choose to favor with your birthday or youth group party?

The Rinksider enlisted the advice of two nationally recognized consultants in telecommunications, business etiquette and customer service. Although they're based 1,200 miles apart, when it comes to using your telephone to win customers and enhance your reputation, they're practically next door neighbors.

Marjorie Brody of BRODY Professional Development (www.brodypro.com) is based in Jenkintown, a suburb of Philadelphia. An expert on corporate etiquette, Brody has authored more than 15 books, including *Professional Impressions: Etiquette for Everyone, Every Day* and *21st Century Pocket Guide to Proper*

Business Protocol.

Dian Lusher spent 19 years teaching telephone and customer service skills to Bell and AT&T operators and commercial customers before launching DYNEL, Inc. (www.cathyharris.com/dian.htm) based in New Orleans.

"I thought that by now," said Lusher, "we would understand that being personable and professional is what sells our businesses and ourselves to people. But it just hasn't happened."

If you're looking for an edge to set you apart in an arena where personal service is key, follow the *Ten Tele-Commandments* religiously and our experts say your business will be blessed.

1. Familiarize everyone with how your phone system works:

"There's that wonderful phrase, 'I'm going to transfer you, but if I lose you...' If the person who answers the phone can't do a transfer, you have to wonder what else they can't do. If you and your staff never learn to speed dial, that's O.K.," said Lusher. What's really important for a profes-

sional image is knowing how to do transfers and holds.

2. Answer the phone promptly with a clear, concise message:

These days callers begin to get impatient somewhere between three and five rings. "Remind yourself of how many rings you would be willing to wait through before you'd go on to the next potential party provider or roller skate retailer in the yellow pages," said Lusher. Before you pick up the phone, take a deep breath, refocus and tell yourself that this caller is the "customer of the day." This call could lead to your biggest sale of the year.

"There are companies that say so much when they answer the phone that I'm not sure, by the time they get it all out, I even called the right place," said Lusher. "Say whatever you can on one breath comfortably. Give the name of your skating center - and if it's a long one, sometimes that's all you can get out. It's nice to say 'Good afternoon,' but that's not



Marjorie Brody of BRODY Professional Development is an expert on employee etiquette.

really expected today."

3. Your tone of voice should project a friendly professional image and a big smile:

"One way to make sure you have a smiling voice is to put a mirror next to your telephone and actually look in that mirror and smile when you pick up the phone," said Brody.

As the Fortune 500 CEO's do, call your own number on a regular

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basis, Lusher suggested. "Hear what your callers are hearing."

4. When you use an automated message for scheduling and event information, provide callers with other options:

By all means, use a recorded message to tell the daily dozens of callers, usually kids, what your schedule is and what special events are coming up. But remember, the caller may be a mom or dad, a civic group leader, or an administrator with your local school district. Always give callers the option of being transferred to a "live" staff member or at the very least, give them the opportunity to leave their name and contact information with voice mail.

And if you do use voice mail, identify yourself by name, and let callers know you regret not being available when they called.

5. Always, always, always return calls promptly:

When you must use voice mail, it's important, said Lusher, that your system allow you to retrieve (and thereby be able to promptly return) calls from another location or with your cell phone when you can't get back to the rink.

When Brody recommended a video consultant to an acquaintance, "She e-mailed me, saying 'I'm having trouble getting them to get back



Make telephone etiquette a priority in the coming year

to me. Are you sure they're any good?" Don't plant seeds of doubt by failing to meet your commitment to return calls, one of the most frequent complaints heard by both Brody and Lusher.

6. Teach your staff appropriate etiquette:

If the person the caller is asking for is unavailable, said Brody, have your staff person ask if there is some way they can be of assistance. Don't put callers on hold without asking. When taking messages, repeat names and numbers back. And make sure the person for whom the message is

intended gets it as soon as possible.

7. If your staff screens your calls, teach them to do it tactfully:

"You don't ever want people to feel as though they are being screened," said Brody. Tell your staff that rather than saying, "Who is calling?" or "She's in a meeting," Brody suggested, "She's in a meeting right now. Let me see if I can interrupt her."

8. When you can't give a caller your undivided attention, make an appointment for when you can:

If you've answered the phone,

but due to circumstances beyond your control, can't get involved in a full length conversation, say so tactfully, advised Brody. "Say you picked up the phone because you really wanted to make this connection, but can't talk right now. Then set a time that's convenient for both of you to talk."

9. In a noisy environment, headphones can be the answer to your prayers:

In addition to freeing your hands, headsets eliminate much of the background noise in a busy setting as well as neck and shoulder discomfort. Lusher also noted that many people are better able to convey energy and enthusiasm while standing and moving around.

10. Listening is key for handling both complaints and sales calls:

Defending your skating center and your employees is a natural reaction - but to diffuse the anger and frustration of someone who has called to complain, said Lusher, allow them to tell their story - uninterrupted. Let the caller vent, be empathetic, then see what you can do to resolve the problem.

The best sales people, said Brody, are those who ask the best questions, then listen to find out what the customer wants before talking about what they have to offer.

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