

The Art of Telephone Therapy

One of the most frustrating tasks I undertook during my twenty-plus years in customer service management was quantifying customer service behaviors. How and why were some behaviors better than others? Some things just *seemed* right in the world of customer service. I was not always able to prove why – that was just the way it was.

I urged agents in my employ for years to allow an upset customer to vent. My directive was based on what I had learned during years of handling challenging telephone calls. “Venting is therapeutic,” I would say. “Customers will feel better and be easier to handle when you give them time to work off some of their steam,” I added. In one call after another using this tactic, an upset customer would eventually be transformed into someone who was both accommodating and reasonable. How? By employing good, old-fashioned “telephone therapy.”

Ask a good telephone service professional if they view their position as similar to a counselor or therapist and the answer will be a resounding “Yes!” Anyone who has handled customer telephone calls for any length of time will understand that the role of service professional and therapist are analogous.

Then it happened.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* recently published an elaborate study on the benefits of psychotherapy using the telephone. A psychiatrist at the Group Health Cooperative in Seattle reported that 80% of patients who received telephone therapy along with antidepressants indicated that their depression was “much improved” six months later, compared to 55% of those who received medication alone.

The inception of the telephone therapy study was in response to the increasing number of patients who failed

to maintain their in-person counseling sessions long enough to detect any benefits. One out of every four patients attending in-person psychotherapy drop out after just one session; fully half would cease treatment altogether by the fourth session. A psychiatrist responded to this trend by contacting their patients by telephone to find out whether that method made it easier for them to continue with their treatment sessions. It did. The resulting telephone therapy study provided clinical proof about something that I have known intrinsically for decades.

What makes the telephone such a powerful therapy tool? I believe it is the amount of imaging that a good telephone voice is able to convey. 80% of what a telephone service professional conveys is in his or her tone of voice. The content or words comprise the remaining 20%. The tone of voice reveals much about an individual, their intent, and their demeanor.

Five Key Attributes

Customers hear five key attributes in the voice of a service professional. These attributes are vitally important as they encompass 80% of the telephone presentation. The following information is conveyed over the telephone when an astute service person speaks professionally:

- **Health** – A customer hears energy, enthusiasm, and involvement.
- **Assertiveness** – A customer hears diligence and tenacity towards the task at hand.
- **Intellect** – A customer hears whether or not a service professional is knowledgeable.
- **Empathy** – A customer hears whether or not a service professional really cares.
- **Competence** – A customer hears confidence and a “can do” attitude.

These five key attributes work in the favor of a service professional that knows how to leverage them to his or her advantage. They help to alleviate customer concerns and build trust and rapport. However, for the amateur service professional who does not know how to effectively use their tone of voice, the five key attributes look more like this:

- **Health** – A customer hears a lethargic and an uninvolved demeanor.
- **Assertiveness** – A customer hears sloppiness and a weak-willed effort.
- **Intellect** – A customer hears apprehension and uncertainty.
- **Empathy** – A customer hears a monotone voice and apathy.
- **Competence** – A customer hears a timid and “can’t do” attitude.

Costs Involved

Service organizations not leveraging their telephone therapy potential are costing their company money. These costs are revealed in the following practices:

Lost time: The service manager is forced to interrupt his or her duties in order to assist one of the poorly trained agents.

Lost margins: The company is forced to pay for expedited freight charges or make other accommodations to pacify a distressed customer.

Lost productivity: The agent is rendered ineffective and unproductive for the balance of the day due to having to absorb angry retorts from a customer who was unhappy with the inappropriate tone of the agent.

It is my firm conviction that the cost of ignorance is far greater than the cost of training. Improve the skills level

at your service operations and maximize the ability of your agents to provide psychotherapy over the telephone.

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For those service professionals that deal with customers primarily over the phone, courtesy alone is not enough. What you project with your voice can have a powerful effect on the service interaction.

The next time that you sense that you are providing therapy to one of your customers, whether it is on the phone or in person, you are.