

YOUR TELEPHONE – THE FRONT DOOR TO YOUR BUSINESS – AND MORE

By Rick Stearns



Some might argue that the real front door to your business is your website. If you're an Amazon.com or other retail site that only sell on line such as LL Bean or Lands End, the website is not only the front door – it's the entire building. For most businesses, their website is more of a billboard providing general information about the business. The telephone, on the other hand, offers an existing customer or prospect the opportunity to make a human connection with the business. Be it good or be it bad, it allows the caller to quickly form an opinion as to how important their call and subsequently their business is to the company and how they can expect to be treated over the life of the relationship. As soon as the call is answered, or should we say the door is opened, opinions are formed. Consider this, it has been verified that when someone is looking for a new home they form a strong opinion of the home within 10 seconds of walking through the front door. Does the same apply when someone calls a business?

Technology – Good or Bad for Business?

During a recent conversation with a business associate about how advances in communication technology, specifically business telephones, he noted that it's been both a curse and a blessing. As little as 5 years ago if you wanted features such as voice mail or an automated attendant added to your phone system they were add ons. Even for small to medium sized businesses digital phone systems were costly (\$7,500 to \$30,000) and most features or changes to features had to be programmed by technicians who charged handsome fees for their service. Add to this exorbitant (compared to 2013) long distance rates and the total cost of communication was a big number on the P&L. In today's world of VOIP systems, Hybrid VOIP systems, 2 and 4 line business telephones from manufacturers such as AT&T, GE & Panasonic, that now come standard with voice mail, auto attendant and a vast array of other features, the landscape has changed. In addition, many phone vendors such as Toshiba, Mitel and others are now offering phone systems for small to medium sized businesses with much more reasonable price tags. All this being said, you may be asking how is this bad?

Consider the automated attendant function. It really has become a way of life with most businesses and, for good reason. It efficiently processes and direct calls to the right person or department. It also eliminates the traditional "receptionist" from the payroll. It always answers in an expedient manner and does so 24 hours a day. Sounds good! So what's the potential downside? No human contact when the phone is answered. Have you ever heard a caller to a business discuss how much they just love auto attendants? Probably not. Does this outweigh the upside from both an efficiency and financial standpoint? If not, how do you make the experience for the caller as good as possible? Consider having *all of the voice prompts professionally recorded with some of them mixed with background music*. My business recently had a new phone system

installed and the vendor initially asked who in the office would be the best at recording the voice prompts. When we told them we were having all the prompts professionally recorded their response was “We wish all of our clients would do that”. The moment the phone is answered, impressions are formed. The door to the business is opened and making a good impression is paramount. Having a professionally recorded “greeting” welcomes the caller. Making sure this initial contact with the caller is a positive experience is, simply put, “a good business decision”.

Can Your Business Phone be a Revenue Producer?

One much overlooked feature of most phone systems is the hold function. By this, I mean the ability to play music or information about the business to individuals who have been placed on-hold. In most phone systems this function is built in and only needs to be activated by interfacing hardware to deliver the music or messages. Many newer VOIP systems don't even require additional hardware to take advantage of this function.

Is this a feature you should consider for your business? First, ask yourself why people call your business. For most businesses this answer is two fold: callers either want information regarding an upcoming buying decision or they have a complaint or concern about something already purchased. In either case you gain nothing by placing callers on-hold to dead silence. The fact of the matter is that no one likes placing callers on-hold. However, it's just a part of doing business. Even businesses with an auto attendant, which allows callers to access individuals or departments, experience hold time. This usually occurs once the caller reaches the destination and is placed on-hold while information about their call is acquired. How much hold time callers experience will vary by type of business but a recent article in Time Magazine said the average American consumer spends approximately 13 hours (780 minutes) a year on-hold.

How a business manages its hold time can have a direct impact on sales. Consider that there are three choices available when a caller is placed on-hold; The afore mentioned “nothing” (dead silence), music or information about the business. The only upside to *nothing* is that it requires no investment of any kind. When you consider that an estimated 58% of calls to businesses are now made from cell phones having dead silence on-hold often gives the impression that the call has been dropped. The huge downside to nothing is that most callers conclude that their call just isn't important.

If you have music on-hold it's a step in the right direction. Much better than nothing and at least lets callers know their call hasn't been disconnected or dropped. Studies indicate that callers with music on-hold will stay on the line for up to a minute longer than those listening to nothing. One word of caution – if you're using music, radio included, make sure the appropriate licensing fees have been paid. What many don't consider is that music isn't free and the fines for using non-licensed are surprisingly stiff.

The third alternative is to talk about the business when callers are placed on-hold. Does it cost to do this? Yes. Does it take a little bit of effort on the part of the business? Yes. Will it have a positive effect on the business? Studies completed by AT&T and other telecommunication heavy weights indicate that close to 60% of all calls that go into businesses end up on-hold for some period of time. More importantly, 15% of callers placed on-hold made buying decisions based on the information they listened to on-hold. These numbers are hard to ignore. When considering this alternative one should ask the following: “If I had 2 minutes to sit down with every single customer or prospect

and tell them why they should do business with me instead of a competitor what would I want them to know?” And, “If I did this, would it have a positive effect on the business?” If this alternative appeals to you seek out a company that specializes in this mode of communication. Poorly written and produced messages are of no real value.

In Conclusion

Front door or not, your business telephone and how you manage the various functions are an integral part of how you run and promote your business. Make sure the phone works as efficiently and effectively as possible to welcome guests to your business with professionally recorded voice prompts and, when callers are placed on-hold, give them information that will add to your bottom line.

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