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TRAINING IN MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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On call for success

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Our customers are becoming more and more demanding. They often know exactly what they want and they expect us to provide it. They are growing more and more experienced and have learned to compare products internationally. At the same time, our customers are our assets, essential to the success of our business.

A DHL manager once told me that she taught her delivery staff to see \$30,000 printed on the face of each person they delivered to. That was the average value of a new customer over his or her business lifetime. And if that customer recommended DHL to one or more friends, this value was even higher.

Successful companies must keep existing customers happy and, at the same time, attract new business. A study by the Technical Research Programs Institute in the US looked at the reasons why customers leave companies. The results are shown here; the most common reason found was the indifference shown by service personnel.

Why do customers leave?	
They die	1%
They buy from friends instead	3%
They move away	5%
They are attracted by the competition's offers	9%
They are dissatisfied with the quality or price	14%
Because of the indifference shown by service personnel	68%

Source: *Technical Research Programs Institute, Washington (USA)*.

1. Remember the three "Ps"

When making calls or receiving calls from customers, remember the three essential "Ps": positive, personal and perceptive.

a) Be positive

Being positive means telling your customers what you *can* do, not what you *can't*. For example:

- When you are calling to discuss shipping arrangements, don't say, "We can't deliver before the end of May." Instead, say:
"We will be able to get these to you at the beginning of June."

- If you are discussing when to meet, don't say, "I can't make it next week." Instead, say: "Let's meet in the week beginning the 24th."
- If you are discussing prices, don't say, "We never give a discount of more than 3 per cent." Instead, say: "We can offer you a discount of up to 3 per cent."

By looking for the positive way to express yourself, you can often turn bad news around. In this way, you can keep the relationship positive even when the business situation is negative. And remember: people can hear a smile on the phone!

b) Be personal

Be personal whenever you can. This is more difficult on the phone than face-to-face, but it is still possible. Don't forget to use people's names at the beginning and at the end of the call. Also, listen for opportunities to make small talk. Remember, small talk does not only take place at the beginning of conversations, before you get down to business. Often, opportunities for small talk come in the middle of discussions or towards the end of a call. For example, a customer might say, "Thanks for your help, I can go off to the cinema tonight without worrying now." This is an opportunity for you to make small talk about films. Take it - it is a signal from your business partner that he or she wants to introduce a personal element into the business relationship.

c) Be perceptive

Being perceptive means knowing what it is exactly that your customer wants. This requires you to listen carefully to what the customer is saying. Try not to think about your next sentence when your customer is speaking - you may miss something important. Also, repeat key words to show that you have understood, and summarise often so that both sides can check that they are on the right wavelength.

Useful phrases:

- "So what you're saying is...."
- "If I've understood you correctly, the situation is...."
- "Let me just summarise what we've agreed."

2. Dealing with complaints

When Harry S. Truman was president of the United States, he had a sign on his desk saying "The buck stops here!" He wanted people to know that there was no one higher up whom they could go to with their difficulties and problems. He would deal with them.

In work, we have to deal with difficulties on a daily basis. Our customers or clients are not always happy with what we do or the way in which we do it. And they complain - often on the phone.

Here are some guidelines for dealing with people when something has gone wrong, and useful phrases to use at each stage.

a) "The buck stops here!"

Accept personal responsibility because, at that moment, for the customer, you are your company or organisation.

Useful phrases:

- "Let me help you with this."
- "I'll see to it that this is dealt with immediately."
- "I can sort this out for you."

b) Admit the mistake

Don't try to defend yourself or your organisation, even if you are "right". If the customer feels something has gone wrong, then it has! There are two key rules for dealing with the customer:

Rule One: The customer is always right.

Rule Two: If the customer is wrong, rule one applies!

Useful phrases:

- "Let me help you with this."
- "I'll see to it that this is dealt with immediately."
- "I can sort this out for you."

c) Apologise and empathise

Make sure the customer knows you understand the inconvenience caused, and that you feel for him or her. It is quite normal in English to say "I'm sorry"; that does not mean that you are admitting to some awful personal mistake. Practice saying sorry!

Useful phrases:

- "I'm very sorry about this. It must have caused you a few problems."
- "I really do apologise. You must have been very angry."
- "I understand your feelings. I am sorry."

d) Act now

Do what you can immediately to start the process of putting things right. If it is impossible to deal with it immediately, then give a clear timeframe and get agreement on it.

Useful phrases:

- "I'll get on to this right away and I'll get back to you in ten minutes."
- "Our technician is out at the moment, but I'll get him to call before twelve. Is that OK?"
- "Mr López should be able to help you. Let me take you to him and explain the urgency of the situation."

e) Offer compensation

Often a small compensation is enough to satisfy a customer. It shows you value their custom and that you are interested in the long-term relationship.

Useful phrases:

- "I'll send you a voucher for \$100 when you next buy something from us."
- "Naturally, we'll cover the shipment costs."
- "Please accept this small gift because of the inconvenience."

f) Thank the customer

Surveys show that for every customer who complains, there are more than 20 "silent sufferers". So you should be grateful for the feedback.

Useful phrases:

- "Thanks for letting us know about this."
- "Thank you very much for the information and your understanding."
- "It was good of you to bring this to our attention."

It costs five times as much to gain a new customer than to keep an old one.

90 per cent of unhappy customers will never use you again unless you address their problem.

Each unhappy customer tells 10-16 others.

Statistics from the *Technical Assistance Research Program*,
Washington

3. It's good to talk

In many areas of business, e-mails are taking over from telephone calls. It is often easier and less time-consuming to write an e-mail than to ring someone up. However, talking is more personal and more interactive.

So call your customers regularly. You don't always have to have a business reason. Call sometimes just to ask how their holiday was, or whether their conference was successful, or just to touch base. Often a social call will lead to a customer expressing a need, remembering some information they want to pass on or giving you some feedback. And every such contact helps cement your long-term relationship.

"It's good to talk," was once the advertising slogan of British Telecom. Make this your own slogan for customer care.

4. Encourage feedback

If you call your customers regularly, use these occasions to encourage and get feedback about the way you do business. Have **five key questions** ready to ask at any time you think is appropriate:

- Do we keep our promises and deadlines?
- Do we keep you informed on progress, changes and developments?
- Do we solve problems openly and quickly?
- Do we understand your business?
- Are we easy to do business with?

By getting regular feedback, you can more easily ensure that your service is at the level your customers need and want. You can also get feedback on your personal style on the phone. With trusted contacts, customers and colleagues, ask them to assess your telephone skills.

Assess your telephone skills

Please rate my telephone skills based on the following criteria:

Distant	1	2	3	4	5	Friendly
Nervous	1	2	3	4	5	Confident
Untrustworthy	1	2	3	4	5	Sincere
Unconvincing	1	2	3	4	5	Persuasive

The telephone is an excellent tool for getting immediate feedback. But remember not to get

defensive. Accept all feedback as subjective and as a tool to help you improve. And don't forget to thank people for it.

Summary

- **Be positive, personal and perceptive.** Your attitude is critical if you want to build good relationships over the phone.
- **Complaints are good news.** If you deal with them correctly, you keep your customers and even strengthen their belief in your professionalism.
- **Keep in touch with customers.** And remember that phone calls are more personal than e-mails.
- **Get feedback.** In this way, you and your organisation can learn and improve your service.

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