

COLUMNS

The telephone as an instrument of torture

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Am I alone or is common corporate courtesy on many, too many fronts, in increasing and rude decline?

Historically, the luxury arena across all segments was not reckoned for humility in sales, service or business encounters with their various publics: customers, service agencies, consultants and so-called vendors or, in too many cases, even their own people, employees.

In fact, once upon a time, a certain hauteur mistakenly was seen as a way to telegraph exclusivity to the unwashed hoi polloi.

Ring of truth

Much progress has been made over the years. And for many reasons.

The most enlightened management has seen and taken major steps to correct the errors of their ways.

Increasingly demanding and militant best customers watch out: here come the millennials, 86 million of them are putting more pressure on brands to serve intelligently.

Brand is now just the price of admission to the luxury game. A flawless product and highly sophisticated and sensitive service ethic being the two most important things that separate the men from the mice. Vision and strategy always easier than the actual implementation.

Here are six pet peeves that make me wonder and fantasize about publicly calling out offending and insensitive companies for their failure to see and implement common courtesy in keeping with the hard-won aura and equity of their brands.

Surely there should be a business-to-business Yelp that publicly rates, praises or excoriates companies on their courtesy cultures.

1. The telephone as an instrument of torture: You call the general number of a major luxury brand and ask for the president. When you finally get, after at best, several very robotic transfers and reach someone steps away from the CEO, they fail to offer their name. Then begins the "Who am I speaking to? And they, "Who am I speaking to?" back

and forth. That inevitably am I alone leads to phone rage on the part of the abused caller.

When this happens, way too often, it is time for revolution and the guillotine. That those representing C-suite executives in the corridors of corporate power and influence should unprompted fail to routinely offer their names as a matter of simple human courtesy to any and every caller is Customer Service Treason.

Astonishing how often this grand arrogance continues to occur. It is no small thing. Call, phone-mystery-shop your own company and see how well your brand does.

2. The rabbit hole of interminable prompts: You only have the corporate number, not the extension, of the C-suite executive you are trying to reach. And then you are put through a series, sometimes as many as seven or eight choices: if you want service push 1, if you want marketing push 2, if you want push et cetera.

Once you realize you are riding this train and want to exit before being subjected to an organization chart of extensions and try to hit 0 hoping a human will pick up, as often as not the system will not give you a person or even the ability to leave a message with the non-existent operator.

Or, worse yet, you dial 0 and, relieved, you are connected but after 30 rings there is no pick up or ability to leave a message.

Then you call back and pick a department say marketing or public relations thinking there will likely be a person in one of those departments. More interminable ringings, finally a pick up and the person not at their desk. You leave a message. They never call back. Or no one picks up and you wind up listening to the phone ring. Or, lastly, an operator does finally pick up and asks if she or he can put you on hold for a moment without waiting for you to answer.

And there you sit for five interminable minutes listening to some inane corporate Muzak or, worse yet, the same message every minute or so reminding you that you are in a queue and will be dealt with in the order in which your call was received.

3. The "I'm a Dead Voice Zombie doing you a big favor by condescending to speak with you, deal with it, insignificant worm" reply: You actually succeed in getting a live person, if you are lucky, with the smallest shred of humanity or condescending dead voice to answer the phone and from their first breath you are made to feel like your interest in speaking with top management is an imposition and that you will just have to wait your turn.

4. The "What's this in reference to" screening reply: You get to a person in the right office serving the right C-suite executive often after three or five transfers and then The Guardian of the Gate, with as much charm as an ice cube preprogrammed to vet calls in the interests of "efficiency?" asks, as if put upon, "What's this in reference to?" At which point I wish there was a strangle-the-admin-assistant and maybe even the CEO App.

5. The "We can't give you the extension or email address" block: Not wanting to share the business of your call with anyone but the person you are trying to reach or not even wanting to speak with them, but merely wanting to send a personal email, the almighty gatekeeper sadistically lets you know that he or she has been instructed by top management not to release any of the information you need. Even, and this happens frequently, if you say, "He knows me. I'm a friend."

6. The don't know how or fail to transfer disconnect: After a multitude of Muzak laden on-holds or multiple transfers, you finally get to an empathetic person. Their transfer does not take. Back to square one. Even worse, it happens twice in a row.

STAY TUNED for part two of The Common Courtesy Series.

Brands who might just be inspired to take the time to check up on their own telephone protocols too often ignored because hidden in plain sight and, if guilty as charged, hopefully will do the right thing.

It is the little things that often are not so little but deeply telling of a brand's true corporate culture.

When you consider the first encounter with a brand other than in-store or online is the old technology of the telephone, surely it pays to humanize the process and ensure the first important point of contact is genuinely warm, smile in voice and engaging. But, maybe I am old school.

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