STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: TECHNIQUES OF BEST-IN-CLASS VOICE INTERACTIONS

A phone skills refresher to help your agents control the call and manage stress.

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Today's contact centers continue to expand their channel mix beyond voice (e.g., chat, text, email, web and video) to keep up with the communication demands of their consumers and prospects. Voice traffic, while dropping in total demand, is still more than 60% of overall contact center traffic. For some industries, it remains 100%. Voice channel contacts, however, continue to grow in complexity. Subsequently, certain interactions require human capital such as critical thinking, sales skills, good judgment, and the more tricky emotions of compassion and empathy needed to resolve complex issues.

Applying these skills to phone interactions is part of "strategic communication" that applies sophistication and explanation to basic telephone techniques. Today's voice agents are responsible for the caller's experience, whether by solving problems, making sales, or both. They must be trusted advisors AND efficient communicators.

Best-in-Class Phone Techniques for Agents

The following is a series of techniques for your agents as they communicate with customers or prospects over the phone. It's always a good time to refresh! Applying these techniques will enhance the caller's responsiveness as well as the agent's ability to control the call and manage stress.

FOCUS ON THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Each call represents an opportunity to demonstrate customer experience excellence by providing quality service that properly represents the brand, agents that are engaging and caring while listening and responding appropriately. This requires that you to really focus on the experience and on making the caller feel that their needs are being met. Callers want to feel cared about and cared for by a professional.

BE READY AND BE PREPARED

Most contact centers today use "auto answer." Calls are automatically connected to the next available agent; the agent takes no action to answer. Some systems announce the call type as it is delivered in case a specific or unique greeting is required. While others simply ring, the agent must answer as close to immediately as possible; never more than three rings. Either way, you must be READY, figuratively and literally. It is important to be in the phone system's READY state and be mentally READY to handle the call.

You must be prepared... glasses on, if needed, headsets adjusted, systems logged into, resource material available (preferably online), posture upright, and a genuine SMILE! There should be no music playing at the desk, no live or virtual interactions, and no eating, drinking or chewing gum while talking to callers.

GREET THE CALLER

Callers must always receive a warm, upbeat and friendly greeting. Open the call with a standard greeting that includes "buffer" elements, such as: "Thank you for calling," "Good morning," "Good afternoon," etc.; the name of the organization or department; and the name of the person answering. Try asking for the caller's name at the end of the greeting. Then you have an extremely valuable communication tool from the top of the call.

EXAMPLES:

- "Thank you for calling Air One. This is Mary. How may I help you today?"
- "Thank you for calling Air One. This is Mary. May I have your name, please?"
- "Thank you for calling Air One. This is Mary. With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

I am a strong believer in allowing individual agents to craft a greeting that meets the organization's core criteria yet allows for the agent to be comfortable and authentic. There's nothing worse than an overly scripted and lengthy greeting.

PERSONALIZE THE CONTACT

If you haven't obtained the caller's name at the greeting, be sure to get the name early in the call. Pay attention to how the caller introduces himself/herself. If the caller says, "This is Anthony," DO NOT call this person "Tony." If someone introduces himself as "Mr. Smith," call him "Mr. Smith." Generally speaking, people introduce themselves the way they want to be addressed.

Use the caller's name... strategically. Using the caller's name acknowledges the person and builds the rapport required for a positive interaction. We all love the sound of our own name. Heck, most of us even like the landing page of e-commerce sites that "recognize" us ("recommended just for you, Johnny"). Recognition can be deepened when systems provide some history on the caller: previous purchases or interactions, loyalty status, and anything that allows for a more personalized interaction.

Using the caller's name is a big part of "strategic communication." It helps you to break into a "tornado talker's" dissertation. When they take a breath, you can reclaim control of the call by using statements such as: "Thanks for that summary, Mr. Bond. Here's what I'd like to suggest..." or "Well put, Brad. Here are the next steps."

MORE EXAMPLES:

- "Thank you, Brad. I'm looking that up now."
- "Thank you for holding, Brad. I have the information for you."
- "Brad, this policy will double what you already have at HALF the price!"

> "Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment."
>
> —BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Keep one thing in mind... DO NOT overuse the caller's name. That SCREAMS script and comes off as disingenuous.

SPEAK CLEARLY AND ENUNCIATE

Always pay attention to the pace, pitch, volume and tempo of your speech. Good enunciation builds confidence and trust in those listening to you—and you sound smarter! Say all the syllables in all your words clearly and pronounce the consonants at the end of words. Poor enunciation, also known as "lazy speech," leads to a caller's loss of confidence.

A broadcast rate of speech works best on the phone; between 150 and 160 words per minute is best. Your voice must be audible; listen to some of your call recordings. Can you be heard? And it may not be your voice! Be sure to keep the headset microphone even with your mouth; sound doesn't come out of your chin! It goes without saying that raising your voice is as unacceptable as telling someone to "calm down." Neither ever works.

Add interest and spice to your speech. Think of your voice as a highlighter that is able to add appropriate emphasis to your words. Think of what happens to people when they are angry. They use many elements of speech—volume, tempo, pace, and of course, language—to communicate their points. Consider using the same methods to build confidence when communicating over the phone. Make your caller HEAR what "caring" sounds like, what "empathy" sounds like, and what "compassion" sounds like. Seize the power of your human communication skills to build confidence in the caller and in yourself.

MANAGE STRESS

The ability to influence outcomes via communication extends well beyond the customer experience. Individuals who practice "strategic communication" achieve better

Positive and Defusing Statements

"I'll find that out for you."
"I can help you."
"Let's discuss an alternative..."
"May I recap the situation?"
"Let's work together to..."
"I can assist you with that."
"Let's review the details."
"We value you as a patient."
"We know your time is valuable."
"I apologize for the inconvenience."
"You can call us anytime at..."
"I hear you."
"I'm so sorry that happened."
"Please help me understand."
"In order to better serve you..."
"Please let me help you."
"Let me get you some help."
"I'll stay on the line with you."
"Here is what we can do..."
"I understand how you feel."

outcomes in less time and with less stress. Individuals with strong communication skills often have the ability to manage their own stresses by communicating to themselves positively about what things around them "mean." Stress is often caused by the meaning we provide to activity in our lives. When we utter phrases to ourselves or others such as: "Oh, this stinks," "I never get what I need," "So what," and "Who cares," we weaken our ability to remain optimistic, empowered and forward-thinking. Load your internal dialogue with positivity. Your external dialogue will benefit not only the caller but yourself!

LISTEN ATTENTIVELY

Have you ever been on a service call and had to ask the agent, "Are you still there?" That is not a sign of good listening on the agent's part. True listening requires total focus on the caller. Let them know you are there by offering feedback.

Ask questions to identify needs and confirm understanding. Open-ended questions and statements yield richer information ("Please tell me more about the damage") than closed-ended questions ("Is your address still 1010 Sesame Street?"). Repeat and confirm to assure that you have clarity.

The word "listen" is a verb and an action word. Listening is a skill that must be fine-tuned constantly. We live in a world of noise; tuning out has become a mental game we play to save ourselves. That doesn't work in the contact center. Practice "focused" listening on all calls and difficult calls will go much more smoothly.

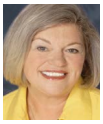
BE POSITIVE AND OPTIMISTIC

The key to all voice interactions is to reflect positivity and optimism by using words and phrases that build, not break. This goes a long way in defusing potentially rising emotions and escalating situations.

Techniques and Skills Add to Confidence and Control

Training, coaching and staff development are constants in today's contact center. A "refresh" on fundamental skills is a great way to remind even the most senior agent that "strategic communication" is at the root of all we do. But it can be a risky and tricky business.

Communication is often compromised when frustration, low morale and stress are factors and contact centers have a long history of being stressful environments. Techniques and skills that contribute to an agent's sense of confidence and control result in a more productive and happy workforce as well as an enhanced customer experience.



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