

# The Voice - It's the Front Line of Customer Service

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# **The Voice - It's the Front Line of Customer Service**

*Written by JJ Lauderbaugh, CMC*

John, a printing company manager, called me to report the amount of his bid for a complicated project we had discussed. John was friendly and personable, obviously eager to please me and secure the new business. I accepted the bid, but then added that I would be returning another item because it was flawed.

John's attitude quickly changed. His voice dropped from an approachable, lighthearted level to a no-nonsense, disapproving tone. Why did he change? Why did I feel I'd done something wrong? Wasn't it he who created the flawed product?

This is how customers learn whether or not a company is willing to provide value-added service. Value-added means giving the customer more than expected. As a customer, I had expected John to say, "Send in your original copies and we'll redo the order immediately. Thanks for letting me know." Instead, he said, "I thought they looked all right. Well...send your originals back and we'll take a look at them." Even though I couldn't see him, I knew he was frowning.

Our choice of words and tone of voice give very strong messages of our underlying attitudes as they shift during a conversation. We can also hear our customers' voices switch when they change attitudes about what we're saying.

In telemarketing and telecommunications, the slightest change in attitude is broadcast more quickly because we are getting only one sense. The usual visual distractions are missing, so the voice and tone become much more significant. In my speaking and consulting business, I use audio and videotapes. The audiotapes of live presentations always have to be edited, but the videotapes can be used as they are. The visual component of the video overpowers the verbal and reduces its significance.

When we're not available to our customers, we rely on our recorded voice on answering machines or voice mail to continue the communication.

Attitudes are very noticeable in these recordings, too. When you make a recording, you can better appreciate how your callers will perceive it by closing your eyes and listening to the playback..

Some customer service reps decline to use recordings as a means of receiving feedback and improving their approaches. In my opinion, anyone who takes this position does not have the self-esteem and attitude to be a good telecommunicator. I once made the mistake of allowing a young woman I'd hired for telemarketing to put off being taped for months. She appeared to be so confident that I thought she must be doing fine.

Finally, I insisted on the taping, only to find she had not been following any of our proven techniques to gain business. Later, after we both realized she didn't have the skill to be a telemarketer, I let her go. It was then that some of my clients told me that letting her go was not a loss to the company.

She had not possessed the same values and vision the rest of the company had. She had "snowed" me for a while until I heard her recordings with customers. I was sad to think she had left a negative impression on a large number of customers. She had been the company in our customers' eyes.

Our front-line people must also be good listeners. Believe it or not, you can hear your customers' body language, dress, physical and mental well-being, self-esteem, attitude, education, experience and knowledge about your service or product. In seconds, we also reveal the same information about ourselves. It's all in the music of the voice. The voice contains the past and present history of our lives.

Every voice can be and is labeled as happy, refined, depressed, enthusiastic, babyish, macho, smiling, concerned, defensive, condescending, fragile, strong, etc. When we listen to our taped conversations, we can hear how others would label us. Sometimes the message is so negative we want to change it.

If your desire to change the voice is strong enough, it can be changed quickly. A person with a low, no-nonsense voice could be labeled intimidating or defensive. This voice usually sounds monotone and has a "get out of my way" attitude. If you look back over the person's life, you might find some unresolved conflict, such as a nasty divorce, that caused the no-nonsense, tough attitude.

Years later, that same attitude is still present without the person even being aware of it. Little conflicts on the phone with customers can quickly trigger this negative response. The young girl who had a doting father may have been encouraged to act fragile and to use a high, wispy voice to get what she wanted. Now, as an adult working on the

phone, she hasn't a clue as to why her customers don't take her seriously. She comes across as fragile, like a little bird that couldn't possibly take on any more responsibility.

I'll bet you can think of people in your life who remind you of the fragile bird and no-nonsense type people. If they have attitude problems in their personal relationships, they'll have problems with customers and fellow employees, too.

Our customers deserve our consistent best. When we become aware of negative past history remaining in our voices, it's time to make changes. Here are two techniques that have worked with others in a number of different industries.

#### CHOOSING A VOICE

Place your open hands, with fingers together, in front of your ears so they touch the sides of your face. Your hands will block the usual sound of your voice when you speak. Say your name several times, starting with a very low voice and gradually rising to a point where it sounds too high. Repeat the procedure and stop when you reach the middle, mellow range. It is this tone that sounds approachable to your customers.

I'll never forget one of the first successes we had with a young, no-nonsense type woman. She was unsuccessfully attempting to sell a service over the phone. After doing the exercise and finding her approachable voice, we asked her to use the new voice for the next week. At the end of the week, her face was bright and alive because she had begun to make some sales. She said, "I felt so silly using this

higher voice. I guess I started laughing at myself, and my customers heard my smile. All of a sudden, they seemed to like me and what I was selling."

She became more successful because she was taking herself less seriously. As her voice found its natural inflection at a higher level, she sounded more enthusiastic, and her customers found it contagious.

## SELF-THERAPY

We all have conflicts and negative feelings that show in our voices, and the worst is the unresolved conflict from our past.

Muriel Schiffman wrote about a technique to rid yourself of these attitudes in *Gestalt Self-Therapy and Further Techniques for Personal Growth*.

Go to a quiet place where you will not be overheard or disturbed. Think of the person, dead or alive, with whom you have this unresolved conflict. Say out loud all the things you could possibly say to that person. Get as emotional as possible. Cry! Scream! Yell! Call the person names!

Continue until you can't think of anything else to say. Then, be the other person and say aloud everything you think he or she might have said to you. You'll be surprised at what will come out of your mouth. Continue until you can't think of anything else to say. You can repeat the process if you have anything more to add. Personally, I have never found the need to repeat it again on the spot, although I sometimes do at a later date.

You'll feel exhausted and drained. You'll have a different perspective on the conflict, and it will have become defused and less important. Don't tell the person you have "done the work" on him or her. You'll notice your voice will gradually reflect the change in your attitude.

Customers are expecting our voices to be in the middle, mellow range that is approachable and pleasant. They expect us to be friendly and eager to please them, even when they're unhappy and complaining. Instead, we take the complaints personally and our voices change to show our hurt or disapproval. Yet, this is exactly the time when our customer-care training matters the most. The way we handle disagreements is a measure of our genuine concern and care for our customers.

This caring concern starts with management empowering front-line people. The first step is to hire those with people skills, good attitudes and the desire to learn to be proficient in handling calls, both inbound and outbound and in person or a chat room.

Many people find it uncomfortable to make outbound calls, but outbound calls are important because they reduce idle time and create a more productive team. These calls may be traditional "cold calls," or proactive calls to survey existing customers on the quality of your service.

In the shrinking youth market, we're not always able to hire people with all the attributes necessary to be proficient at outbound calling. Instead, we must be prepared to teach our staff to build their self-esteem, people skills and better attitudes.

When management creates a caring service environment and culture, it also cuts down on turnover. By treating our employees the way we

want them to treat our customers, they'll experience a sense of belonging and pride of ownership.

One of the best management techniques is to make employees feel a part of something important, i.e., taking care of customers. In effect, employees see themselves as enlisted to fill an important need for other people and quickly begin operating as "consultants" more than "marketers." Consultative marketing, better known as relationship marketing, is one of the most powerful approaches we have. It makes us instant friends with our customers and builds trust and quicker acceptance of our product or service.

Get rid of scripts that are too programmed and stiff. Don't call at dinner time, or try to build rapport by asking how the busy customer is that day. Get real! Know what you're selling and what the benefits are. Take your cues on how to proceed from your newfound friend, the customer.

The base of "instant friendliness" is genuine caring for the customer. It's like being the host or hostess at your own party, only your party is being held on the phone with just the two of you or in person or on the computer.

The hostess always makes sure everyone is enjoying the process, even when something goes wrong. How many times have you heard the host say, "Don't worry about that spill, we'll take care of it in a second." Hosts and hostesses make you feel comfortable again. Consistency of mood and friendliness help you put your customers at ease, too.

This comfort and ease allows you to build rapport more quickly and to educate your customers on how you can better serve them. The

human element will always create challenges and lessons to be learned in this fast-paced world. Meet the challenges and be the best manager, the best communicator and the best person you can be. Enjoy the process. Have fun treating your employees and customers royally. It's a win-win situation for everyone.

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