



Your **PEOPLE.**

Our **PROCESS.**

Stellar **PERFORMANCE.**

10 Tips for Improving Inbound Sales and Service Telephone Results

by Ronna Caras
President, Caras Marketing & Training

The combined sales and service environment is not new. Companies of all sizes have used “generalists” to handle inbound calls for many years. Tasks range from taking orders, canceling orders, tracking shipments, scheduling installation or repair, correcting or explaining billing, responding to complaints and solving problems. The idea was to make it easy for the inbound caller to get many things accomplished without being bounced to several people. The belief was that one contact handling every issue should result in the lowest possible cost of operations. Low costs would guarantee high profits. It has not always worked out this way.

Missing from the sales and service model, in many companies, is the understanding of the costs associated with lost sales opportunities. Customers who don't buy from you, buy from someone else. Eventually, they are not your customers anymore. If a buyer places an order and is not told about peripheral products needed to make the thing work, you have lost the incremental business on that one sale and maybe every sale thereafter. When maintenance agreements are not discussed, and then maintenance is required, unhappy customers may be done with you forever. Promotional pricing or products that are not mentioned, can end your relationship with a customer who now feels cheated.

To provide genuine “customer care”, it is essential for your inbound representatives to thoroughly understand their role as consultants on products and services. Think about the last time you had your car repaired or work done on your house. I use these examples because most of us do not have the expertise to give step-by-step instructions to our mechanic or carpenter. We know the problems and we rely on them for the solutions. This means your best agents must be able to manage the conversation to satisfy needs the caller knows about and states aloud. This same agent must be able to identify unspoken needs and work to satisfy them as well.

Business customers and consumers feel satisfied when they are treated well while their problems are being solved. If the cost is commensurate with the value the product or service brings, they will be thrilled to buy more than was planned.

The following 10 steps will help sales and service people to improve their sales results while increasing customer satisfaction at the same time.

1. Have a clear call process or model.

Some things are obvious. Callers answer the phone with some sort of greeting and an offer to help. For example, *“Thank you calling Medelivers. This is Antoine. How may I help you?”* Clearly this is step 1.

Unfortunately, computers tend to take over from there. So, instead of focusing on their callers, agents tend to bully them with impersonal, but necessary questions. Once they’ve made the conversation all about their order screen, it’s pretty tough to re-engage a caller and start to up-sell. Way too many opportunities are lost right here. Way too many agents feel the cold breeze between themselves and the caller and fail to even try to up-sell.

By giving agents a process to follow, they can set a tone more likely to create customer satisfaction and sales, concurrently. Try this one, for example:

- Greeting – we know how this one works and what to say.
- Engagement – This is where we respond to what the customer told us when we asked, “How may I help you?” But, we also make it clear that we are interested in providing good service and that we are listening. It can be as simple as, *“I’ll be happy to take care of that for you. You’ve come to the right place. May I please trouble you to provide me with your account number or telephone number so that I can access your file?”*
- Need Development –Where we ask all of our questions to understand the problem that caused the inquiry or complaint. It is also where we take the order and gather billing information. Questions here should include how the product will be used, if the customer has the needed supplies or peripherals and how we can best support the customer so the product is used satisfactorily for a long time.
- Present Solutions – Where we offer recommendations for additional products or services and special promotions. It comes after need development so that it can begin with *“Based on what you told me about your situation, I’d like to recommend you try... Would you like to add that on to your order? ”*
- Close – Wrap up the call by repeating back what has been accomplished. Review the order, the delivery date, the total price, and any other issues that were resolved, etc.
- Reinforcement – *“Thank you for calling Medelivers”* is not a very powerful end to a call with an important customer or prospect. Try saying something more compelling such as *“Thank you so much for being our customer. Please let us know when we can help you again.”* Or, say something that relates to the conversation, such as *“I know you are going to be thrilled with your new copier and our delivery service. Please call us again if we can be of service.”*

2. Use your “fancy guest” manners.

Say *“please”* every time you ask for a piece of information. Say *“thank you”* every time you get what you asked for. Never fail to do this. It is missing from telephone sales and service conversation so often that when you do it, you will be perceived as significantly superior to every one. How easy is that?

3. Use statement/question pairs to control the conversation without interrogating the caller.

Callers know you need information in order to identify them and then address the reason they phoned. Still, responding to a long list of dry questions is uncomfortable and often annoying. Annoyed people treat you poorly and make your job harder. Then, when you get to the part where you supposed to be presenting a promotion or up-selling, some of them get their revenge and say “no”.

In order to get your questions answered and create a comfortable dialog, you must be a great conversationalist. Great conversationalists know that they must blend telling and asking in order to stay interested and interesting.

Here's the strategy for managing pleasant, interactive conversation while you service and sell. We call it "the statement/question pairs conversation technique":

- When you need to ask a question, place a statement in front of it. For example, "I just need to fill out your billing information. What address do you use for billing?" Or, "My name is Lee Overby. May I please have your name?"
- When you need to tell about a product, service or promotion, describe it and then ask a question afterward to see if the customer heard you and has developed an opinion on its value, so far. For example, "This weeks product promotion takes 20% off of our most popular highlighters. They have a wide tip and come in yellow or blue and a box of 10 is only \$4.42. Are these something you will use in your business?"
- When you need to create action, explain the reasons for acting now and then ask your closing question. For example, "When parents express a concern about interest rates on the loans, I usually recommend that we go ahead and complete the application right away before the information I provide changes. Can we take about 5 minutes and get this done?"

4. Take care of everyone's name.

I grew up with the name Ronna Caras and I bet most of you reading this are pronouncing it incorrectly. Names are tough, especially in the United States where so many ethnicities are represented.

These techniques can help to make your agents more comfortable with the challenging names. They will also make the contact more inclined to cooperate.

- Pronounce the name to the best of your ability and ask for confirmation right away: "We usually speak with Ronna Caras. Am I pronouncing that correctly?"
- Listen closely when the contact says his/her name and say it again immediately to prove you can use the correct pronunciation.

5. Pre-write product and promotion descriptions so they are colorful and concise.

Nobody is so good that s/he can just "wing it." It takes years of practice before a great salesperson hones in on the perfect sentence to describe or explain something. The best salespeople eventually come up with statements that are very compelling. But you probably don't have years. Meanwhile, you've got salespeople at various levels of experience explaining your products, services, company, features, benefits and value with a wide range of competence and confidence. Some are very wordy and filled with "ums" and "ahs" and some are so generic the caller can't see any value in the investment.

Support sales efforts by creating nicely composed descriptions of everything you offer. Teach agents to use the adjectives and not to edit them out in order to save time.

6. Allow for the human buying process.

There is no point in trying to create action if you have never created interest. Yet so many sales pitches try to present and ask for the order in the same breath. Callers say no to a great offer because they have been pushed to fast and when faced with a decision, can decide not to decide.

Human beings have a clear and visible process we go through to make a decision. Some people go through it more quickly than others because of their personalities and the genuine urgency they feel. Others are more cautious.

Teach your salespeople to move prospects gradually from:

- Fear – Where they say “no thanks” before they even understand the offer, unless they are moved to the next step.
- Interest – Where the mind starts to see some value and is willing to consider the offer.
- Evaluation – Where the prospect compares accepting your offer to keeping things the way they are.
- Desire – Where the prospect wants what you recommend.
- Action – Where you secure your goal

7. “Overcome” objections, don’t “Rebut” them.

Even the best sales conversations will run into some objections. Objections happen when callers are not sold yet the salesperson has asked for the order, or when callers hear something that moves them back to the “fear” step of the buy (see tip #6). Objections need not be deal breakers.

Successful salespeople must be prepared to overcome objections in the most convincing way possible. Too often, they rely upon what we call “rebuttal” which rarely succeeds. The rebuttal is an old-fashioned method which says “I understand how you feel, but... here’s why you should reconsider.”

In 2002 we know how damaging that “but” is to a relationship. Any good that was accomplished by the empathic and connecting behavior of “I understand how you feel” is completely obliterated by the “but”. You may as well have saved time and said, “I don’t care how you feel. You’re wrong and need to do it my way.”

Here are the steps to overcoming objections that will truly re-engage the contact and provide the solution needed to get the sale. Please notice the 4 steps are actually 2 statement/question pairs (see tip #3)

- Empathize – “I understand how you feel.” Or some statement that makes the caller feel listened to and understood. This disarms the prospect.
- Clarify – “What feels wrong about this?” or “Is it the cost that you are concerned about, or do you have another issue?” This question is the key to making your sale. Ask a question that helps you to understand or proves you already understand. Then, be quiet and hear what the caller tells you. That’s the information you need to get your sale.
- Present Solution – “I see. Based on what you’ve told me, here’s why this is right for you.” Use the caller’s words and tailor this solution to address the concerns you just heard. That will make it highly effective.
- Gain Agreement – “What do you think about my idea now?” or “Can you see why this makes sense for you?” These are both examples of “trial closes” that will help to move the prospect back into the buying process so you can close your sale.

8. Be a student of good diction.

In our society, the ability to speak clearly is equated with intelligence. Fair or not, people whose Ts and Ds and INGs sound crisp are treated as though their message has more value. People who use standard pronunciations for common words are perceived as more knowledgeable. Knowing this gives us an advantage.

Here are some ways to practice key sounds and words to improve the way you are treated on the telephone:

- Ts, Ds, INGs – these “dental” and “guttural” sounds may vary based on the neighborhood where you were raised but in the sales world, there are clear distinctions between right and wrong. Practice with a tape recorder to improve your clarity with the words below.
 - T wouldn’t; prospect; difficult; got; minute; must; consult; software; lighten
 - D sand; held; recommend; thousand; card; trend; field; build
 - ING catching; meeting; hoping; trying; working; planning; thinking

- The letter R poses a challenge for many. Practice with a tape recorder to improve your clarity with the words below.
 - R wear; consider; order; card; answer; prepare; secure; carton; market; corner
- STS at the end of a word is just plain tricky. Practice with a tape recorder to improve your clarity with the words below.
 - STS lists; specialists; forecasts; rests; tests; assists; suggests
- These words are often (the T in “often” should be silent) mispronounced and a simple correction can result in more sales. Practice with a tape recorder and the crazy sentences below.
 - Because it is preferable to the company, I basically express business strengths when asked.
 - Mischievous government regulators probably escaped using personal credit cards and avoided irreparable harm to their often-challenged reputations.
 - Disoriented representatives and supervisors gave accurate descriptions of their expertise, according to a federal government spokesperson.
 - It is often either nothing, something or everything, wouldn't you know?

9. Express the right emotions at the right time

The moment we answer the phone we begin influencing a caller. We influence callers to think well of us and our company, or we influence them to think poorly. Scripting helps agents to know the right words to say to meet company standards. Teaching the proper emotions helps agents to deliver the messages in a way that has the right impact.

Just like in a movie, telephone dialog must be delivered in a convincing way, or the listeners won't feel engaged or cared for. The proper emotions are the key. There are 4 emotions that are appropriate in an inbound sales/service business conversation. If a caller is not projecting 1 of these 4 emotions at all times, then s/he is projecting the opposite emotion, which almost always results in failure.

Here are the 4 emotions and a way to practice them:

- **Enthusiasm** – Perfect when beginning the call; or when describing your company and its offers; as well as when reacting to an explanation of your caller's situation and goals. Enthusiastic delivery requires use of lots of highs and lows in the voice, variation of speed and the emphasis or “punch” of key words. The opposite of enthusiasm is boredom. It is accomplished by keeping the voice monotone. Or, worse, the sing-songy delivery when someone is reading. There is no middle ground here. Boredom will reduce sales results and customer satisfaction. Learners can practice the two opposite emotions with this statement, “Based on the situation you describe, I'd like to recommend you take advantage of all 3 of our offers. This will allow you to meet with an expert in your home, already have approval on the first part of the investment and see pictures of the location on the Internet.” You will see very quickly the impact that enthusiasm makes.
- **Curiosity** – Lets the salesperson sound “interested” instead of “intrusive”. It uses the higher range of the voice, varied pitch and a lilt at the end to indicate the question mark. The opposite of curiosity is doubt or disdain, which comes across as sarcastic or nosy and is not an effective way to move a relationship to the next level. Learners can practice the two opposite emotions with this question, “What process do you go through when making a new investment?”
- **Encouragement** – When you need to gain more information or cooperation, you must be able to make the contact feel comfortable and safe enough to go deeper. We encourage people by “dragging out” our words and using the lower more soothing range of our voice. The opposite of encouraging is, of course, discouraging. Learners can practice the two opposite emotions with this statement, “I see.”
- **Calm** – When you need to disarm and diffuse. Using the lower range of the voice and a slower pace, soothing words will be very powerful. The opposite of calm is anger. Too often, words that are meant to gather input carry an angry sound and

hurt the chances for a swift and satisfactory resolution.

Learners can practice the 2 opposite emotions with this question. "How would you like us to solve this?"

10. Don't just listen, pay attention.

Listening is the great equalizer for salespeople. Callers talk in order to communicate with you. When people talk to you it is because they want you to know how they feel, what they believe or what they want. This information is exactly what you need to know so that you can re-position your offer to satisfy this person. The more they talk, the better chance you have of making a sale. So, getting people to talk and hearing what they say, actually makes the job of a salesperson easier. I had a great Sales Manager years ago that said, "Give them enough rope and they'll hang themselves."

Monitor 10 calls or monitor 1000 calls. It is obvious that many salespeople and service people do not bother to listen. While the caller is talking, many representatives are busy thinking about how they can interrupt, what they are going to say next or what task they wish they could move on to. Still other agents believe they can listen and be thinking about their next question at the same time. They could not be more wrong. Listening is only useful if you pay attention. It is only helpful if you can take the information the caller just provided and use it to decide how to respond.

Here are the 'rules' for listening to increase your results:

- Anytime a caller speaks, you must be prepared to write down what s/he says. By stopping to do this, you force yourself to pay attention.
- After a caller speaks, you must respond with some sort of empathy statement. This makes your caller believe you were listening and that you heard and that you understand. "I see what you mean" and "How interesting" are 2 examples.
- If you do not understand what someone means, try "Can you please tell me more about that?" or "Can you please help me to understand why that is important?" Nothing could be more flattering to a caller.
- Once you understand the information the caller has provided, decide what to say next to help the caller understand why you are recommending the up-sell.
- If you need to change to a different product because of what you just learned, do so. Your chances of making a sale are very high when it is based on what a caller just told you.

These 10 tips are just a few of many that we have taught to thousands of successful sales and service professionals during the last 12 years. We are happy to share them with you so that you can continue to improve your results and develop the skills of your staff. Please let us know if we can be of even greater service to you now, or in the future.