

One Of Those Days

I had one of those days yesterday, when no one I wanted to talk to was available to talk to me. I was pretty frustrated by the end of the day, but probably not for the reason you think. It wasn't because I ended up leaving voice mail messages for most of those people, and only one of them returned my call. It was because most of the people who answered the phone made the people I wanted to talk to—clients or potential clients—look bad.

Throughout the morning, I heard several variations of: "He hasn't made it in yet." During the mid-day, I heard several variations of: "He (or she) is out to lunch." From about 3:00 PM on, I heard several variations of: "She's gone for the day."

"He hasn't made it in yet" usually makes me wonder if he's sleeping late. It certainly makes me wonder if he's as serious about doing business as I am. Now, granted, many of these were situations where I was calling to try to sell something to the absent individual, but what if I were trying to buy something? Does "He hasn't made it in yet" inspire confidence in the person or the company? In the same vein, does "She's gone for the day" make you more or less likely to want to buy from the person or the company. And while everyone is entitled to be "out to lunch" for at least a part of every day, does a potential customer—or even a potential supplier—need to know that?

Here's what I think would be a better all-purpose response: "He (or she) is meeting with a customer."

From my perspective, the best possible reason for not being available to talk to me is to be talking to a customer (if I'm not one), or *another* customer if I am. Customers are the lifeblood of any business. Meeting with customers is the ultimate business activity. I think you can fault someone for coming in late or leaving early, but not for meeting with customers!

Another Customer

Here's another thought connected to the possibility of *another* customer. Whoever answers the phone could say: "He's meeting with a customer, or perhaps I should say *another* customer. Who is this please?" Do you see how this minimizes the possibility that a customer might feel slighted in any way?

Granted, this probably qualifies as a "little thing," but I've written before that it's usually not one big thing that makes companies and salespeople great, it's that they master the little things that can make big differences.

What Is This About?

Here's another "little thing" connected to the issue of answering the telephone. I am routinely asked: "Can I tell him..." or "Will she know what this is about?" On one hand, I can appreciate a business owner's desire to screen calls. On the other hand, this is not a very customer-friendly strategy. Do you really want a customer or potential customer to have to say: "I want to talk about maybe buying some printing from your company!"?

Here's my advice. If you don't want to take calls that might be from salespeople, simply have all your calls routed to voicemail. Have the person who answers the phone say: "She's meeting with a customer, or perhaps I should say *another* customer. Can I put you into voice mail?" Then make it a point to check your voice mail regularly enough that you can return the calls you want to return on a timely basis.

Yesterday, I asked three people who asked me what I was calling about if they'd been told to ask that question, or decided to do it on their own. One said her boss told her to screen all of his calls. The other two said they just assumed their boss would want them to protect him from annoying salespeople. The point is this. If you've instructed your staff to give anyone who calls you the third degree, that's not good business strategy. And if you haven't told them what to say when people call you, you should probably check to see if they're making you look good—or the opposite!