

Authorized excerpt from
***WINNING WITH THE CALLER FROM HELL – a survival guide for doing
business on the telephone***
by Shaun Belding

Introduction

So You're Hearing Voices . . .

Even though you can't see the face behind the disembodied voice piercing its way through your headset, there's no problem conjuring up a vivid mental image. Beady, nasty little eyes. Sharp, pointy, unbrushed teeth. Knotted, mousy hair. Sunken cheekbones. Jutting chin. Oh, yeah, and horns — you're pretty sure there are horns. The Caller from Hell — Alexander Graham Bell's personal contribution to our workday stress.

I often wonder if Mr. Bell, toiling in his little Boston workshop with his assistant Thomas Watson, knew what he was getting us all into. Could he possibly have envisioned that telephones would number in the billions by the new millennium? In his wildest fantasies, could he have imagined that millions of people would one day walk around with little versions of his creation in their purses and pants pockets? Could he have known that the telephone would quickly cease to be just another invention and become instead a tool that would shape our very culture and the way we interact in our business and personal lives?

As legend has it, Mr. Bell made his first test call in his workshop to Mr. Watson on March 10, 1876, and uttered the now famous words "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." Perhaps Mr. Bell would have got a glimmer of things to come if — instead of Mr. Watson's enthusiastic "I can hear you! I can hear the words!" — he'd been interrupted with "Please hold, your call is important to us. An operator will be with you shortly. . . ."

We have developed a true love/hate relationship with the telephone. All you have to do is look at the twitchy behavior of a businessperson who has been deprived of his or her cell phone for a few hours to appreciate our dependence on phones. Yet at the

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same time, there always seem to be undercurrents of resentment toward the raw intrusiveness the telephone represents. There's no polite knock, no inquiry as to your availability or interest — it just rings. And try as we might to ignore its persistent peals, its demands to be answered are virtually irresistible.

When it comes to doing business, the telephone is invaluable. It's part of your connection to the rest of the world, and, while you can love it or hate it, there's really no way to avoid it. It's also an essential part of customers' connection to you. It's part of your face to the public. And the public is not always happy.

Difficult callers — Callers from Hell — contact you for a number of reasons. Some have problems they want you to resolve. Some want something you can't give them. Some just want to vent their frustration or anger. At some level, Callers from Hell are usually customers. They could be external customers, for whom you or your company provides goods or services, or internal customers, those within your company to whom you provide support.

Whoever they are, and whatever the reason they're calling, the benefits of being able to resolve a situation quickly and positively cannot be overstated. An overwhelming body of research tells us that a single conflict with an organization can have far-reaching consequences in long-term customer satisfaction, and that there exists a direct correlation between customer satisfaction and profitability. In *Modeling the Relationships between Process Quality Errors and Overall Service Process Performance* (1995), David Collier identifies that the average customer who experiences a service failure tells nine to 10 people about the experience. That's a scary number for people in the customer service business. But if you're a manager or supervisor to whom unsatisfied calls or complaints get escalated it gets even scarier. A 1998 study by Tax and Brown suggests that only five percent to 10% of dissatisfied customers actually take the time to complain following a service failure. This means

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that, by the time you've heard one single complaint, there have already been from 10 to 20 negative incidents, with negative word of mouth having spread to between 90 and 200 people. If your company averages one complaint a week, that represents up to 10,000 people having heard something negative about the company every year. How many complaints do you get a week, a month, a year? You may find the results of doing the math unsettling indeed.

The secret to success for most businesses lies in a company's ability to retain its customers. In fact, a 1990 study by Reichheld and Kenny shows the direct link between satisfaction and profitability, establishing that a five-point improvement in customer retention can lead to an increase in profits from 25% to 80%. Learning how to reduce and resolve conflict, therefore, isn't just one of those warm, fuzzy intangibles — it is essential to the health and growth of any business. And it's not just a matter of being *nicer*. Addressing conflict over the telephone requires a number of unique skills.

I am always a little surprised that, despite our familiarity with the telephone, and the intricate ways in which it is woven into our social fabric, so few people have mastered this marvelous communications tool. But perhaps we've simply grown so accustomed to it that we've begun to take it for granted. The fact is that the telephone can be an immensely powerful tool when used properly. And, of course, like most tools, it can also work against you if you're not careful.

The Role of the Telephone

In the business world, the telephone's role continues to increase in importance. In fact, for many people today, the telephone *is* their business. Call centers, from small teams of technical support representatives to huge rooms filled with operators and customer service representatives (CSRs), comprise one of the fastest growing segments in business today. But it's not just call centers where the role of the telephone is surging — it's everywhere. A real estate lawyer friend of mine with a burgeoning practice once

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confided in me that it had been months since he'd seen a client face to face. The nitty-gritty parts of his communications would go back and forth via e-mail, and when his clients wanted the personal touch that's where the telephone came in. The same holds true for accountants, bankers, brokers. The truth is that — for some of us — if we could phone in a haircut we'd do it.

Doing business over the telephone has tremendous advantages. It's instantaneous, and it's more conducive to accurate expressions of emotion and urgency than its younger but fast-growing sibling, e-mail. It allows us to stay better connected to our customers and provides a handy forum for customer feedback. The downside (there's always a downside) to this wonderful invention is that in some ways it's almost *too fast, too* instantaneous. People can pick up a phone, dial a number, and connect with us in the heat of the moment without first cooling off to think things through. We can use the telephone as a crutch, replacing common sense and basic initiative — speed-dialing a technical support person rather than spending a few moments trying to solve a puzzle on our own. People's unabashed dependence on telephone support has become so widespread, in fact, that many companies have resorted to burying their toll-free technical support numbers in the small print deep within owners' manuals. The hope is that people might eventually give up looking and actually try to resolve things themselves before burdening the tech support group with silly questions.

One of the double-edged swords of the telephone is the lack of the visual component. On the plus side, it gives us a certain amount of anonymity and the ability to create illusion. Let's face it — the whole phone sex business is based on this single benefit of letting imaginations fill in for the visual component. I can't say for certain, but my guess is that the people actually answering the telephones in those services are not the same bikini-clad models showing up on the late-night television infomercials.

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The telephone can allow us to be someone we're not or give the appearance of being greater than we are. I remember my surprise at discovering that a salesperson whom I'd been speaking with at what I thought was a large corporate office was actually working out of her trailer somewhere in southern California. Some people are blessed with naturally and wonderfully rich voices that project an image far beyond their physical appearance. (As one call center manager I know with such a voice puts it, "I have the perfect face for a call center.")

The downside of the telephone's audio-only aspect is the profound degree to which it restricts our ability to communicate. Without the benefits of facial expressions, gestures, and body language, we are reliant solely on our voices to carry the burden of expressing emotions, being persuasive, and delivering silent messages about how nice we really are. A great many of the challenges we face on the telephone have to do with this lack of a visual component and the ensuing miscommunications.

I'll never forget monitoring a call to an Internet service provider's technical support representative (TSR). The caller was coming across as cold and uncooperative, speaking in one- and two-word sentences. At one point in the conversation, as the TSR was trying to walk her through a procedure, she interrupted and stated, matter-of-factly, "It's just not working." The TSR responded by saying, "I'm not sure what you mean, ma'am," and was met with stony silence. *She doesn't want this problem fixed, she just wants to make someone feel bad*, I remember thinking to myself. It was a thought I was soon to become quite ashamed of when an audible sob gave me a clue as to why she hadn't been speaking.

We all know how to use a telephone. It's a pretty simple device to operate. Even in a high-tech, sophisticated call center environment, it doesn't take long to become proficient with the equipment. Like so many skills, though, there is a big difference between being able to use a tool and being able to use it well. I know how to swing a

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golf club, for example, but, as anyone who has ever golfed with me will attest, I'm a long way from the professional tour. This is about how to use the telephone more effectively. How to take advantage of its strengths and compensate for its weaknesses. It's about how to deal with difficult situations and difficult callers — those times and people that increase our stress levels and ruin our days. It's about increasing our callers' satisfaction and our enjoyment at work.

Whether you work in a large call center, fielding hundreds of calls a day, or in a small office, dealing with only a handful of calls, the skills outlined here are both relevant and powerful. The telephone is pretty hard to get away from no matter where you live these days, and even the ubiquitous call display can't predict what's in store for you at the other end. It's best to be prepared.

You can purchase *Winning with the Caller from Hell – a survival guide for doing business on the telephone* at <http://www.beldingskills.com/customer-service-books.htm#caller>. If you would like multiple copies (10 or more) for your team or company, please email info@beldingskills.com for more information.