

Your call is important to us!



Please stay on the line until your call is no longer important to you...

YOUR call is important to us!

Work-health-life specialist and strategist **Anne Whatley-Dale** examines the increased frustrations for customers when calling into organisations.

Many contact centre phone menus include a message similar to this one from the ATO:

“We’re committed to providing quality customer service and will treat you with courtesy and respect. You can help us by treating our staff the same way.”

‘Fair enough’ you might say. I did at first too. Then I looked at the reason behind these messages and thought about the expectations they set and the potential for them to backfire.

Why these messages?

Is this more evidence of an insidious creep happening in these post-covid times: where some customers are venting the frustrations of the past few years when making calls?

Are the messages there because frontline service teams are dealing with more challenging calls? Is there an expectation that calls are more likely to escalate as the conversation continues? Or is it a combination of both?

Evidence shows me these messages can be for any or all of these factors. We can all answer this from our own experiences or from listening to the vented experiences of others.

We’ve become accustomed to the familiar message, “your call is important to us - please hold the line.” We’ve formed opinions of how sincere we feel the words are. We call anyway.

Dreading the call

Most of us now only make a call if we have to. This is especially true whenever we are calling into organisations with a reputation for never-ending menus and long waits on hold.

The modern day call experience raises two new questions:

1. Are the frustrations of dealing with menus, virtual assistants, being placed on hold too long or being told to ‘go to the website’ or ‘send an email’ causing callers to feel frustrated before they even speak to a human?

2. Are service providers blaming customers for poor outcomes without recognising conversations are a two-way street? Forgetting their service teams need to deliver customer service with courtesy and respect whilst resolving queries effectively and efficiently?

The answers to these questions depend on perspective, as well as how much ownership the service provider and team take for two things: firstly, the outcome of the call or contact; secondly, the expectation that is set by the ‘please be nice to us’ message.

In the period I was thinking about and then writing this article, I heard numerous examples of time-wasting, frustrating calls and unresolved situations. Each one being the result of someone not being listened to, heard, or understood. Some were for simple customer service queries, others had more complex debt and account issues.

These callers were normally calm, reasonable people who were driven to

hanging up after voicing frustration. Many then acting out of character to vent on social media or write adverse Google reviews.

The reality is each knew they'd made things worse for themselves because inevitably they'd need to call again in order to resolve their query!

We expect phone menus and to wait on hold but what we don't expect is to reach someone who appears disinterested, disengaged, unwilling to help or unable to communicate clearly.

Taking these issues back to your own workplace, it's worth some reflection on what part you and your team might play in whether a call escalates? Unfortunately, in many cases, it's a lot!

Our self-reflection, should start with remembering:

- most people are reasonable and respectful;
- frustration with phone menus and systems is a reality;
- each debtor you speak to knows their money/debt story first-hand;
- we're responsible for what we say and how we say it; and
- we need to "seek first to understand, then to be understood"¹ because frustration builds when there is a lack of understanding.

Accepting responsibility for what we say makes it easier to work out how to make a call as respectful and productive as possible: by listening, understanding and responding in a way that shows the

relationship is important, we will keep the focus firmly on finding an acceptable solution for all parties.

Team members have a responsibility to:

- answer the call in a polite, friendly, professional way;
- engage in the conversation;
- show empathy, kindness and understanding;
- show respect;
- speak clearly, using words and language the customer understands;
- listen effectively and check they understand what the customer is saying; and
- check the customer clearly understands what they're being told.

For a business, this means strengthening communication skills, building resilience and ensuring support is on hand for any team member when they need it.

Words have power. When we use words that trigger the 'fight or flight' or 'freeze or fawn' response, frustration builds, and calls escalate. It's also harder then to find solutions.

So, yes, customers need to show respect - as much as they need to receive it from your team. Healthy, respectful, engaged conversations form the foundation of exceptional service.

Back to the message we started with - highlighting an expectation or service promise that can't or won't be delivered is dangerous as it can create an issue where there wouldn't have been one.

State clearly what you expect from your team when dealing with customers/debtors.

Provide skills and support that allow them to treat each conversation as a new one.

And, if all else fails, remember the last time you made a call you didn't want to, battled a menu, waited on hold and then spoke with someone who didn't, couldn't or wouldn't help you.

What about messages that state 'aggressive behaviour will not be tolerated'? Such messages are definitely fair and reasonable. No one needs to go to work to be on the receiving end of an aggressive tirade.

So, help your team members do their job well and minimise the risk of calls escalating. This will isolate the few callers who are unreasonable and allow you to follow a process to manage their calls differently. ■

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ENDNOTES

1. Habit 5 in 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People' by Stephen R Covey

MY time is important to me!

The Australian Customer Experience Professionals Associations in a recent article asks the question whether the old saying about two things in life which can't be avoided being death and taxes should be updated to reflect a third: being stuck on hold to a call centre!

Although culprits for call delays are often identified as government departments such as the ATO and Centrelink, increasingly survey data reveals consumers complaining of long delays in trying to get through to most businesses, including telcos, utilities, banks and insurers.

Waiting on hold is frustrating but it is often worse if waiting for a response to a customer service enquiry: ServiceNow released a report claiming in 2022 Australians "spent 96.5 million hours waiting for the issues to be resolved by customer service departments".

But hold time isn't just wasted time - to the customer, long hold times communicate that you don't value or appreciate them enough to be there for them when they need support.

