

CAR SIDE MANNER



I wrote a column about the importance of the telephone as a business tool a while back. Satisfied that I had gotten my point across, I walked away from the keyboard hoping never to address the issue again.

Silly me.

It seems that the telephone as a business tool has fallen on even harder times since then. Things

are so bad that Ferd Berfel of the National Institute of Telephone Technique (NITT) dropped me a line the other day begging me to devote some ink to the problem. Ferd has outlined several key points he feels have reduced the effectiveness of the telephone in building good customer relations. In fact, he suggests that certain techniques, both old and new, are actually driving business away.

Let's look at a few:

- **Answering Machines:** Answering machines are popular for handling after-hours callers. As a special added bonus, many answering machines come with a pretaped message to save you the trouble of making your own answering tape.

The message is recorded by an out of work Shakespearean actor with a resonant baritone voice. You may be tempted to use this "canned" message, as is. But the caller will never know if he has reached the right phone number. Your business isn't identified, and he doesn't know if that was Al's Auto Repair, or Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, answering the phone.

Just to make sure he didn't dial the wrong number, he calls again and repeats his message. In the morning, you get to sort through 15 phone messages—from three customers.

If you do make your own recording, include your name, the name of your business, and a promise to return the call ASAP as a sign of appreciation for the caller's interest in your business. But keep it short. Some messages are so long, that the caller has time to balance his checkbook before he gets a chance to talk.

Finally, call your answering machine and listen to your own message. A friend had a machine with a beeper originally designed for installation in an arcade video game. It was capable of shattering a wine glass at 50 paces. You can imagine what it did to a human eardrum.

His messages suddenly stopped. When informed

of the problem he asked, "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Because we were all afraid to call, that's why.

- **Phone Mail:** Most shops aren't big enough to have phone mail yet, but who'd a thunk that fax machines would ever take off? We need to squelch the growth of this insidious demon now.

The invention of phone mail ranks with the San Francisco earthquake, the great Chicago fire, and Michael Jackson's last video as one of the darker events of this century. On paper it sounds like a great idea. (Why not let a computer handle all those silly people who call us every day? We'll give them the job of punching buttons, pay them nothing for their effort, and fire the receptionist to boot!)

You say you've never experienced phone mail? It's cheaper than renting a movie, and one phone call can keep you busy for hours on a rainy Saturday afternoon. Go ahead, try it.

The following message, or one like it, will normally be delivered by a computerized voice, complete with simulated sinus infection.

"Good morning, this is Frammis Industries. If you have a touch tone phone, please touch One for Sales, Two for Marketing, Three for Technical Support, Four for Bookkeeping, Five for Accounting, Six for Advertising,.....and Fifty-Five for Shipping.

"If you don't know the number of the party to whom you wish to speak, hit the pound key on your phone, and enter a number evenly divisible by 13, or three digits representing Mickey Mantle's highest batting average. If things go as planned, a real human will answer the phone right after the coffee break is over.

"If you don't have a touch tone phone, drop us a line at Frammis Industries. Thanks for calling."

- **The Salutation:** Let's get back to humans talking to humans. *Salutation* is an old fashioned word for greeting, usually accompanied by an expression of good will. Greeting the customer when he calls is very different from answering the phone. The word "yeah" is neither a greeting nor a minimally acceptable answer. The word "yeah" should have been buried with the last Dead End Kids movie, years ago.

I don't know about the rest of you, but a pleasant voice, interested in my call and eager to help me with my problem, is still the nicest way to be greeted when I call. It makes a favorable first impression and encourages me to do business.

Many callers won't give you a second chance at making a first impression.

Hope that helps, Ferd. Ring me up and let me know if this column does any better than the other one did. If I'm not in, when it beeps—talk.

—By Ralph Birnbaum