

The Right Receptionist

No Second Chance to Make First Impression

By Lawrence M. Kohn

The receptionist: Your private St. Peter, determining who does and does not pass through the inner doors of your law firm. The first representative of your firm that most people meet. The first voice any caller hears.

But unlike St. Peter's establishment, your office does not have the luxury of being indifferent about the impression your gatekeeper makes.

In a busy law firm, the receptionist has to have the reflexes and nerves of an air traffic controller, the serenity of a Zen master and the diplomatic skills of a career foreign service officer.

Whether your firm has one of 15 incoming lines, every call needs to be handled with professionalism, confidence and charm. The receptionist is the person responsible for providing the vital human connection at the end of the telephone link.

A tall order? You bet. Yes, all too often this vital employee is thought of as "just the receptionist." The wise law firm takes the trouble to define the specifics of the job and devote time to on-the-job training.

If you don't train your receptionists beyond showing them how to work the phones and giving them the in-house directory, you're missing the opportunity to turn them into important public relations assets.

Getting What You Pay For

My experience as a marketing consultant confirms the cliché that you



get only one chance to make a first impression. The one your receptionist makes is the one that sets the tone for your further relationship with the caller.

Unfortunately, lawyers are often unaware of public relations problems in their reception rooms. They always get the red carpet treatment from the receptionist, who learned on her first day to recognize *their* voices and respond with vigor. So the lawyers assume everyone else gets similar treatment. Unfortunately, it ain't necessarily so.

Why? Not because "good help is hard to find." More often, it's because receptionists occupy the low rung on

the telephone pole. Their job is filled by "entry level" candidates and paid accordingly.

But you get what you pay for. Compromising the cost of a receptionist is a dangerous practice that can lose you both good will and good business.

Consider for a moment what the job really entails. Your receptionist interacts with your and every one of your partners, *and with everyone else who calls your office*. The receptionist is responsible for controlling the tone of every conversation and establishing how best to serve the needs of the caller. And in the time left over, he or she receives deliveries and makes office visitors feel welcome and comfortable while waiting for their appointments.

Quality Performance Takes Talent

How does one get quality performance at the front desk and on the phones? First, be more selective in your hiring. Upgrade the image of the job in your own mind. Being a top-notch receptionist is not a job just anyone can do, and you shouldn't hire just anyone to do it.

Second, be willing to pay the price. You don't need an MBA to fill this job, but if you want someone better than a drop-out from the local hamburger flipping academy, you will have to pay accordingly. If you expect your employee to value this job, then you had better value it too. And in the business world, pay is still the primary indicator of value.

Third, be clear about your expecta-

tions. If you have hired good people and pay them well, and *still* are not satisfied with performance in the front office, the difficulty may well lie with the way the job is defined.

What Should a Receptionist Do?

A top-notch receptionist is responsible for the following:

- Answering all calls in a prompt, friendly way and within four rings;
- Directing calls to the appropriate person;
- Keeping callers informed of the status of their call every 60 seconds;
- Keeping callers *out* of the “holding” pattern;
- Speaking clearly, intelligently, and using correct grammar and pronunciation;
- Making visitors in the reception area comfortable;
- Making lawyers aware of the presence of their callers.

Receptionists are *not* responsible for filtering sales calls or taking messages. These jobs take too much time. While your receptionist is madly scribbling notes, important calls are left unattended and valuable clients are kept on hold. While he or she is playing conversation checkers with unwanted salesmen, impatient callers are left cooling their heels.

Keeping Callers Out of Limbo

How *should* a receptionist handle calls? Of course, not all calls are alike. But they should all be handled in fundamentally the same way: With politeness, efficiency and promptness. Rudeness is *never* appropriate - no matter how obnoxious or irritating the caller.

Besides these basics, callers are entitled to the right to finish their sentences. There is nothing more maddening than to begin a call, “This is Mr. Smith calling for Mr. Prudent. I’d like to . . .” only to be interrupted with, “Hold please,” or worse yet, to be dropped

off into some electronic limbo without so much as a word. There’s a difference between efficiency and being abrupt.

Callers are entitled to know what is happening to their calls. “I’m connecting you with Ms. Goodlaw’s secretary,” or “Mr. Prudent’s line is busy. Will you please hold?” are helpful phrases. They let the caller know what’s going on.

Hanging On or Hanging up

Once a caller has taken the initiative to call your office, the burden for completing the connection should not be thrust back on him. I recently called a particular lawyer only to be told - much to my amazement - “I’m sorry, Ms. Goodlaw is in court. You’ll have to call back.” Then the receptionist hung up.

Ms. Pleasant, our ideal receptionist, would have said; “Ms. Goodlaw is not in the office. May I forward your call to her secretary?”

A good receptionist should try to get back to callers on hold every minute or so. “I’m sorry, Mr. Prudent’s line is still busy. Would you like to continue holding or would you like to leave a message?” Remember that hanging on hold is just one step from hanging up.

So who does wrestle with the relentless sales reps?

Your secretary should do further screening: “Mr. Prudent’s office. May I ask who’s calling?” She’s the one who should ask, “Is this call related to a current matter? I’d like to pull the file.” Or, “May I ask the nature of your call?”

Don’t misunderstand me here. I know that secretaries are busy too. They also have a hundred tasks to keep track of at any given time. But it is the secretaries, not the receptionists, who know their lawyers’ schedules and have access to client files.

They are also in a much better position to determine if a sales person can offer value. Not all sales reps are un-

wanted nuisances, and the secretary is better able to determine if they have valuable goods and services to offer or to what other department they should be directed.

Following the Golden Rule

After you have trained your receptionist to handle calls properly, how do you know your front office is running trouble-free? Simple. Have someone who is a stranger to the receptionist call the office and report the kind of treatment received. That may seem like a lot of trouble, but not when you consider that your firm’s reputation is on the line every time your receptionist picks up the phone.

The summation of the case here is simple: Your receptionist should treat callers the way you’d like other people’s receptionist to treat you. Try to imagine your state of mind if you were facing a difficult lawsuit, a divorce or a criminal proceeding. How would you want to be treated when you called your lawyer’s office?

That’s the way you want your receptionist to handle your clients. When people reach out or touch you for your advice and expertise, they want to hear a warm, friendly, efficient and human voice as well.

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