



Michael A. Brown's

Business To Business By Phone[®]

Third Quarter 2002 Edition

SOUND TRACK FROM A GREAT CALL

"Mr. Brown! Bob Wilson here, from Federal Express. I want to thank you for being a loyal Fedex air express customer. And I'm hoping to hear how you handle your ground shipments now that Fedex offers ground service. Is this an OK time?"

"Hi Bob ... sure! What's up?"

"Thank you! I've been reviewing your account and over the past year, most of your express shipments have included either one or two packages, and happen at varying intervals. How does that pattern compare with your ground shipments?"

"We do air much more often than ground because of the tight production-to-presentation schedules for our training programs. So ground is infrequent and by mail, which means a trek to the PO and a wait. We call UPS for 3 packages or more."

"That's exactly why you ought to consider Fedex ground. You save the trips to the Post Office, because we pick up just like for air express. And you don't have to write separate checks to UPS because you already have an account with us and your discount applies. Our ground rates are comparable to the other guys. How about it?"

"Bob, sign me up!"

THEY KNOW CUSTOMERS DON'T LIKE IT, SO HOW COME THEY DO IT ANYWAY?

Research shows that people detest automated customer service. The *Austin American-Statesman* reported that "this category (of business practice) elicited one of the most negative reactions in the survey. Nearly every respondent - 94 percent - said it was 'very frustrating' to call a company and be greeted by a recording rather than a human being."

Despite such overwhelming thumbs-down, the automation vendors keep pitching it and some otherwise smart companies keep buying it. Why

would companies do what they *know* their customers don't like? Three reasons: the economy, short horizons, and empathy deficit.

The economy. In tough times, the promise of cost savings via headcount reduction, supposedly offset by automation, can look very appealing. So when the vendor sings the song, struggling executives swoon, employees get pink slips, and customers suffer. Then things get worse ... because when the human factor leaves a business, so do customers. It is very hard and expensive to recover from this all-too-common mistake.

Short horizons. Because business evolution is faster than it used to be, it has become fashionable ... perhaps too easy ... to automate as much as possible. The thinking is, "if we automate, we can change directions quickly." But when companies focus only on the short horizon, they lose sight of the long view. They try to change too quickly or too often and customers get left in the dust.

Empathy deficit. Some executives seldom if ever experience what it's like trying to do business with their own companies from the customers' perspectives. So they fail to recognize that automated transactions may be part of, but are not the same as, customer relationships.

Best Advice: People and automation are not mutually exclusive. Even in a tough economy, use the latter to augment the former, not necessarily to replace them. Keep your eyes and intellect on the long view even as you deal with the short horizon. Regarding empathy: get with your people, get with your customers, get real.

PHONE PHUNNY

The caller asked me, "So what does your company do?" I replied, "I help business marketers do profitable **Business To Business By Phone**[®] via consulting and training." Three second pause, then the caller sighed, "Oh man, my very first day on the job and I have to call you!"



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HOW TO DEAL WITH CHALLENGING AND FIRE-BREATHING GATEKEEPERS

Even with your directness and courtesy in trying to reach your named contact, some gatekeepers will challenge you. Be ready with respectful yet firm responses:

- *Is this a survey \ a sales call?* "It's a call of business inquiry \ exploration to determine how well we may match up. Can you connect me please."
- *It's not a good time.* "Can you please check Mr\Ms Contact's schedule and suggest the very best time for a conversation."
- *He \ she wouldn't be interested.*

Customer: "Mr\Ms Gatekeeper, he\she already uses our product (or service) and we need to talk about it. Please connect me."

Prospect: "That's what we'll find out in our conversation. Will you put me through please."
Alternate: send the prospect an e-mail invitation to your web site. Call again after their visit.

How to deal with impossible, fire-breathing gatekeepers:

- Call when they are not there: before and after normal business hours and during lunch.
- Call the direct contact's phone-mail after hours and leave a "sneak preview" message about what you want to talk about. Say when you will call again. Ask your contact to tell the gatekeeper that it's OK.
- Use alternate media such as e-mail, fax, or even a hand-addressed letter in your logo envelope.

CALLING SCHEDULES v. MARKETPLACE REALITY

If your outbound calling schedule is based on time blocks, be sure to align the blocks with your

prospects' and customers' optimum contact hours. Do not set call blocks for your own convenience.

Likewise, do not schedule calls when your prospects and customers almost certainly are doing something else. For instance, don't try to phone "C" level people first thing on Monday morning: that's usually ramp-up and staff meeting time for them. Call them very early or very late instead.

Above all, take the straightforward, bold, but often-overlooked step of actually *asking* your contacts *their* preferences of times. Then abide by what they tell you.

SELLING COMPETITIVELY

Never make the prospect or customer feel like a bystander to you vs. your competitors. For example, do not praise nor criticize your competitors. Merely acknowledge them. Don't ask, "What do you like about them?" or "What would you change about them?" Instead, keep the dialog focused on the prospect or customer. Ask about his\her requirements and preferences and explain how your product or service addresses them best. Sell the "you gets."



I CALL 'EM AS I SEE 'EM

At a recent marketing conference, I offered guidance about when to consider an outsourced phone service bureau, when not to, and some things to look out for. Afterwards, two people from phone service bureaus ripped me about the "when not" and "look out" parts. They wanted me to talk-up service bureaus and omit the downsides. I refused. Clients, in no instance will I shill for any particular business model. In your interests as well as mine, I promise to keep providing independent, unbiased advice.