

Work Daze: Etiquette power

by *Bob_Goldman*

I don't lift my pinky when I drink my morning Red Bull, but that doesn't make me an ill-mannered slob. No, what makes me an ill-mannered slob is coming to the office in my bathrobe, sporting a three-day growth of beard. It's crude, rude, and everybody at work avoids me like the plague.

And that, my friend, is etiquette power.

For those of you who still cling to the archaic niceties of traditional behavior, there are still ways you can use your etiquette, or lack thereof, to advance your career.

"Etiquette is power and it will make your business stand out from the competition," according to the rather scary slogan of First Impression Management, where the specialty du jour is telephone etiquette. I have to admit, this is an area where American businesses can use some serious assistance.

Is there anyone left in the universe who has not experienced a wave of foreboding when a recorded voice on the other end of the telephone says, "Your call is very important to us." Even the Bushmen of the Kalahari know that what follows this pledge of fidelity is a bum's rush to a recorded "telephone tree," a self-selecting, keypad-pushing telephonic maze that will leave your fingertips bruised and your patience drained as you wander the audio back-alleys for hours before eventually giving up and hanging up, all in one disgusted gesture of impotence.

The clients of First Impression Management must be unusual since they actually want to talk to their customers, instead of simply annoying them. According to its Web site, www.firstimpressionmanagement.com, the firm offers customized in-house training that will "set the tone and control the telephone call in a way that will delight your customers - every time."

The last time I was delighted with a phone call it cost me \$5.99 a minute, and frankly, I'm not 100 percent certain my naked astrological guide was either naked or gifted. All I know is that I am still expecting that phone call from Scarlett Johansson.

The subjects covered in the training include "voice tonality, cheerful and appropriate greetings, and effective on-hold techniques." I have not taken a seminar - yet - but I suspect that your standard greeting, "Hey, Dude, what's shaking?" will probably not pass muster. Nor is your technique for putting clients on hold likely to get you an A-plus. Simply pressing the hold button and then immediately hanging up before heading off to lunch is not going to qualify as "transferring the call smoothly," though it might give you an opportunity to practice your skills in "handing angry customers and solving their problems." Not that there's a better technique to

handle frustrated callers than putting them on hold and hanging up all over again.

While I'm sure telephone training is good for some businesses, it won't help someone like thee or me, workplace jokers whose main goal in dealing with telephone callers is to get rid of them as soon as possible, the better to get back to what's really important, playing online games and gossiping with our cube-mates.

While the "accidental" hold-and-hang-up is a proven technique for getting rid of callers - especially when accomplished in the last moments of a lengthy phone call, right before you take their critical contact information - there are other excellent methods for ensuring that your solitude is not disturbed during working hours.

One excellent way to avoid business calls is to automatically forward your phone to the extension of an unsuspecting co-worker, preferably in another state, and certainly in another company. With any luck, by the time the caller gets back to you, they'll forget why they called in the first place. (This method is especially effective for physicians. By the time your callers find you on the golf course they could be dead.)

Another excellent technique is to answer your phone, but pretend that you are the answering machine. Deliver the standard greeting in a mechanical monotone, leaving you an option to actually take the call in the unlikely event it proves interesting. "This is Jim. I'm either on the phone or away from the desk at the moment, unless this is a job offer in which case I'll talk to you right now."

If all your wiles cannot reduce the inflow of telephone calls, there remains one method that never fails. When your phone rings, pick it up immediately and using your best vocal tonality, cheerfully announce, "This is Kaumudi at the Bangalore call center. How may I help you?"

Trust me. That caller is gone forever.

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