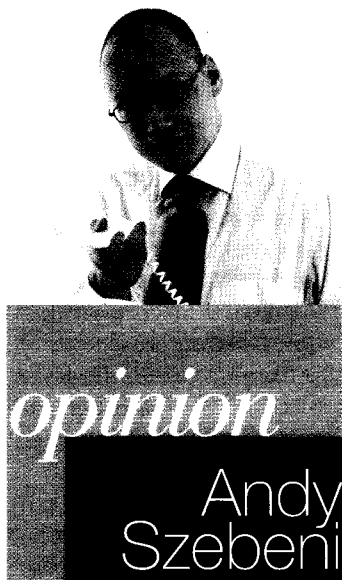


the soapbox



Don't put the phone down: make the most out of cold calls

Cold calls are a breeding ground for amusing one-liners or unnecessary insults depending on which end of the telephone you occupy during the call, such as: 'If I try being a little politer will you try being a little less stupid?' and 'I don't know what your problem is, but I'll bet it's hard to pronounce.'

I have lost count of the ways that people have come up with to retaliate to poor customer service agents or

unwanted marketing calls, and most people seem to get genuine enjoyment from being rude to call centre agents.

Don't get me wrong, I am not condoning poorly executed cold calls or useless help line staff. This type of marketing and customer service can be a waste of everyone's time. But good cold calling is an asset for both prospect and caller.

Every businessperson has been at some point thankful of a cold call as they have ended up starting a beneficial business relationship. Two of my valued suppliers that I still work with called me out of the blue a few years back.

My real point is not to convince 'tele-marketer-haters' to change their ways. It is more about us just being a little nicer to the cold caller. After all, with the popularity of the Telephone Preference Service (a register to prevent cold calls at home and recently business lines) cold callers are fast becoming an endangered species.

I am setting aside December 4 as Hug-an-Agent day because recent research shows exactly how badly we treat them. Staff in call centres and callers in to them were interviewed by Merchants, a call centre solutions provider, and they found that 37 per cent of those surveyed admitted that they have shouted and sworn at customer service agents over the telephone. That is over a third of us, who hurl abuse at these poor souls just doing their jobs.

No employee should expect to be sworn at and abused when doing his or her work. Maybe you proudly told people that you slammed the phone down and gave the rude callers as good as you got. So why would we talk to people in the way we would hate to be spoken to? More to the point, we need to do something to turn the tide of negative feeling, as they are here to stay. Do not consider it a green light to abuse them if the call centre agent is in Indo-Asia or if they are new to the job.

I speak with authority because I used to get quite frustrated with sales agents on the phone. Now I focus on helping them to help me (my usual tactic as a sales trainer, turning the call into a sales opportunity for me). The problem is that so many are badly trained, which is not their fault.

The advice Merchants gives is to firstly try and stay calm, remember that the agent is not always directly responsible for the situation, and to find out who you may need to speak with to get the situation resolved.

So let's save the energy we might use trying to think of clever one-liners. Instead, let's redeploy that energy to be polite and respectful to cold callers and customer service staff.

Andy Szebeni is managing director of sales improvement specialist, A&P Training Ltd. Web: www.a-and-p.com

letters

Waking up to climate change

Businesses need to wake up to the very real threat of climate change, after the release of a British government report warning that global warming could have a disastrous effect on the world's economy, shrinking it by 20 per cent. The warning came following the revelation by economist Sir Nicolas Stern, that tackling the problem now would require one per cent of global gross domestic product.

Small and medium sized operations in particular are failing to plan for the impact of climate change. Climate change experts have consistently warned that Britain faces hotter, drier summers; milder, wetter winters; and an increasingly intensive frequency of extreme weather conditions.

As a result, an increasing number and severity of insurance claims is expected from UK businesses following flood, subsidence and storm damage. Yet far too few businesses are covered for such changes.

Businesses need to get 'climate change wise' and to speak to their insurance broker as a matter of urgency. Take sensible steps to protect your business and employees, and to properly insure yourself so you are covered should the worst happen.

For instance, some quick tips that businesses should consider include: regularly testing their business continuity plan in the event of a disaster; ensuring business stock is not stored directly on the floor but raised at least six inches (to combat flooding); discussing the adequacy of sums insured and extent of insurance cover with their broker; moving IT servers from ground floor to a first floor location where appropriate (to combat flooding) and engaging with regional climate change groups.

Steve Foulsham is technical services officer at the British Insurance Brokers Association

diarydates

Asian Business Association Winter Reception

Benares Restaurant and Bar, Berkeley Square W1
December 4, 6-8pm

Cost: £52.88 - Premier Plus Members, £82.25 - Local Member, Affiliate - £82.25, £105.75 non member

Contact: Call Nicola Merryman at The London Chamber of Commerce on 020 7203 1874 or email nmerryman@londonchamber.co.uk

Women in Business Networking Lunch

33 Queen Street, EC4
December 11, 12-2pm

Cost: Premier Plus Members, £17.63

Contact: Call Louise Azzopardi at The London Chamber of Commerce on 020 7203 1874 or email lazzopardi@londonchamber.co.uk

E-marketing and e-commerce

Guildhall, EC2P 2EJ
January 24, 9-1pm

Cost: £30 + VAT

Contact: Business Link London on 0845 60 23 709

Director-Level Seminar on the Future of the Web

The Groucho Club, W1V 5AP
December 4, 10-12pm or 2-4pm

Cost: Free of charge

Contact: Call The Chameleon Net on 020 7332 6360 or email info@chameleonnet.co.uk

Email your February diary dates to editor@venturer.co.uk