

Soft skills at Work: Returning calls promptly is good for business

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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Several years ago I called a company to order a product for my home. I left a voicemail message, asking where to send the check.

With this sale a certainty, it surprised me that I did not get a prompt call back. I phoned again, but never heard from this business. Since I had met the owner and we talked about this product at length, I was, and remain, puzzled by the lack of response.

These days people are surprised and even grateful when they get a prompt phone call back. In fact, how often do you find yourself saying, "Thanks for returning my call."

What has happened to this common courtesy?

I want to be clear that I'm not talking about unsolicited sales calls, but rather people who contact you with a question, concern or potential business. Not returning the call shows lack of respect and basically sends dollars you may have earned into someone else's pocket.

David Reilly, president of Reilly Benefits Inc. in Churchton, said he believes returning a phone call or an e-mail is not only important but essential, particularly in sales.

"When you fail to return a call, you look unresponsive," David said. "It reflects on your business and perception is everything. If you wait two or three days, it sends the message to the caller, 'You're not that interested in me.' "

When people contact businesses, they are looking for answers right then. While response times can vary due to the type of industry, David told me calls should at least be returned by the end of the same day.

"A 24 to 48 hour turnaround is crazy," he said. "That person will call someone else."

David relayed an experience that convinced him about the importance of getting back to people quickly. When he was on vacation five years ago, he had forwarded

his office line to his cell phone. He was seven or eight miles offshore fishing when his phone rang. Not recognizing the number, he answered it. The caller was a referral and had a question. David was able to help, and this person became a new client.

This happened as he was starting his business, and while David no longer forwards office calls to his cell phone, that experience made an impression on him.

A prompt response also applies to e-mails, David said. The widespread use of e-mail has in many instances replaced getting in touch by phone.

"People don't want to wait three days to hear from you," he said. "If you will be away, make sure you have an auto reply that states when you will get back to them. It may not be possible to call or send an e-mail the same day, but letting them know when they will hear from you makes people feel respected."

David gave me other tips related to returning phone calls.

Always ask if it is a good time to talk. Recognize that the other person's time is important.

Know people's preferences regarding how long to stay on the phone. Practice brevity unless you know a person likes to talk longer. Never use a speakerphone. It can make a client feel irrelevant.

David acknowledged that returning calls promptly and practicing good phone etiquette can some times be challenging.

"You have to pretend that each call is the first of the day and show empathy," David said. "Otherwise, your company suffers. That first impression is often the last."

CONNECT!

Coalition supporters, Woodland Job Corps and the Baltimore Washington Corridor Chamber of Commerce recently joined forces to present a program for the young women in the STARS program about a very important soft skill - that of knowing what is appropriate and not appropriate to put on social networking sites.

STARS stands for Students, Teachers, Achievement, Retention, Success and is a volunteer mentor and tutor program. Gloria Coliton, the STARS coordinator, worked with the Chamber "Women in Business" co-chairs Rhonda Tomlinson, Josie Thompson and Debra May to plan topics that help young women succeed in the workplace.

One of the segments, presented by keynote speaker Terri Holley of Creative Blog Solutions, explained how "My Space," "Facebook" and other social networking sites can affect a person's professional career.

"What you put on these sites is out there forever," Gloria said. "Someone can pull the information back up 15 years later, as many employers are now doing.

"Businesses want to know who your friends are on these sites and if there is questionable behavior because it gives them an idea of the kind of person you are."

Gloria said the young women were told to put constructive things, such as volunteer work, on their sites. "Demonstrate a positive image of yourself," she said.

Good advice for everyone.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, the Anne Arundel County group of organizations dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com.

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