

When Bigger Is Not Better

The Comcast cable guy just stood me up again... for the third time!

It's not the end of the world, though. I suppose staying with my mostly reliable and pretty quick DSL service is still an option, but I'm a complete and utter speed freak. I've seen the future. Not the bald man from New York, but a lightning fast T3 connection with download speeds from 40 to 100 megabits per second. I have one at work and I want the closest thing possible at home so I said "yes" to a 2-hour installation window from 3 to 5 pm this afternoon. That was the third "yes" we agreed to. Having blown the first two, Comcast scheduled today's visit. Incredibly, this appointment has come and gone as well, without so much as a call from my forgetful installer.

You don't want the details and that's not the purpose of this article. It's sufficient to say that with each missed appointment it was up to me to call Comcast and get things back on course. Each broken promise landed the ball squarely in my court.

Have you tried contacting a large company lately? You have no clue where you're calling when you press the buttons on your phone? It could be Tangiers or Timbuktu or any place in between. Technicians in Quezon City in the Philippines, for example, answer my calls to Linksys, and issues on my graphics card are routed to a suburb of Bombay, India. Gone are the days when you could make a call for service and get a local representative. Now I'm always wondering, "Where will this 800 number take me today?"

As it turns out, calls to Comcast are handled in a suburb of Calgary, Alberta. Now, see if this sounds familiar. After navigating through a series of options, I'm finally greeted by a computer voice that says, "Due to higher than expected call volumes, your present wait is... less than 10 minutes." Or, "We're sorry but all of our associates are busy right now. Your call is very important to us. Please stay on the line and your call will be handled in the order it was received."

Did you know the way in which a telephone is answered can make or break more deals than any other form of advertising?

We've entered a new age. I realize that. And I'm fully aware of the challenges facing big companies today. After all, they have to handle hundreds of customers every minute. But the very same phone techniques are now finding their way into small businesses, including many drycleaners, nationwide. Would it surprise you to know that the way in which a telephone is answered can make or break more deals than any other form of advertising? Why spend good money on advertising and marketing and then blow it all when the customers call?

Recently, my call to a drycleaner friend landed me in a voicemail jungle of options identical to those I get when calling a big company. The difference is I happen to know this guy. In fact, he runs a five-man operation and that's if we include his dog. So why make me jump through the hoops? When I finally got him on the line I asked what the answering system was all about and he said it gives his customers the impression that they're dealing with a larger company. I thought, "This is nuts!" After my experience with big companies like Microsoft, IBM and Comcast, why would a small drycleaner want to appear like a big company? On top of that, he claims the answering system allows him to be more productive. In other words, he doesn't have to be interrupted by customers wanting to conduct business.

When your phone can't be answered personally, customers and potential customers should always be left with a professional impression. The best message system is a phone receptionist. Second is a good answering service. Next is voice mail and last is an answering machine. And unless you're a huge cleaner don't take today's technology to an extreme by asking your customers to "Touch 1 if you want hours; touch

2 if you want information; touch 3 to leave a message." And then after they touch 3 to leave a message, more choices start.

This is always a painful exercise for me. I will reluctantly put up with it to do business with a huge, lumbering behemoth such as Comcast, but if I get the same kind of treatment from a small company, I'm easily tempted to take my business elsewhere.

Three of the best selling points for you, as a small business, over a big one are that you're easily accessible, you can respond fast to almost any request and you can offer genuine personal service.

Let's forget about Comcast cable Internet for a moment. Our service provider at work is WebSolutions. It's a small company with only seven full time employees. The office and all of the equipment is only 50 feet away from my desk. If there's ever a problem, the staff is easily accessible. In fact, instead of calling, I'll often walk to their office just because I haven't seen them in a while. And it doesn't matter what they're doing, they'll always take a few minutes to listen to my problem. Usually, they can resolve it on the spot... while I watch! As to personality, the technicians, Jon and Jennifer, are polite, knowledgeable and on a first name basis with us. They take a genuine interest in our company and cheer for our success because they know that if they can continue to make us happy, we'll be with them for along time.

Being small gives you the distinct advantage of getting to know your clients personally and this is a point you should drive home with every means of communication you have every time you make contact with your prospects or customers. It means so much to a person to know they are appreciated as an individual. This won't happen with a big company. With each of my calls to Comcast, for example, I had to repeat my name, address and telephone number... beginning with the area code. And each time a conversation ended I was given a case number for future calls. Why? Because you'll never get the same technician or customer service representative if you have to call back.

Big companies can't offer these advantages and yet, strangely enough, some small cleaners try to emulate them with such impersonal telephone etiquette. It's often said that you only get one chance to make a good first impression, and for many cleaners, that impression is made over the phone. Why not make it professional and warm. You'll sell a lot more prospects and keep far more customers.