

# Handling Telephone Complaint Calls with Poise<sup>1</sup>

Ricky W. Telg<sup>2</sup>

Every time you make or receive a telephone call, you represent the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) and the University of Florida. The person on the other end of the phone cannot see you, so that person's first impression of you and UF/IFAS may well be determined by your voice and telephone manners.

Usually, making a good first impression on the phone will not be a problem, especially when you get pleasant callers requesting information from your department or county or district office. When they get the information, they are appreciative. But there are other times when callers may not be quite so well-mannered. You may have received a rude or obnoxious phone call or two. Primarily this happens when the caller wishes to express a complaint. The tips from this fact sheet will help you handle telephone complaint calls with poise.

## Telephone Etiquette

*Etiquette* is the proper way of conduct in a given setting. There is also a proper etiquette for telephone conversations. Because a person's first impression of you or UF/IFAS may be from a conversation, it is important to adhere to the conventions of proper telephone etiquette. For example, **smile** when you talk. Can you hear a smile? You bet! And a cheery disposition on your end of the telephone line is likely to head off gruffness from a caller who has a complaint. Following are some other pointers to keep in mind when you answer the telephone:

- Identify yourself, office, or organization in a few words. Try as quickly as possible to learn with whom you are speaking.
- Maintain a cheerful and considerate attitude toward each telephone caller. A caller usually can recognize if you seem bored. This is discourteous and paints a poor image of you and the organization.
- Use the telephone properly. Keep your lips about ½ to 1 inch from the mouthpiece. Pronounce letters, numbers, and names clearly. Spell out names if they could be misunderstood.
- Return calls. If you must leave the telephone during a conversation and will not be able to return immediately, say that you will call back and then **follow through**.
- Say "good-bye" pleasantly and replace the receiver gently. The person making the call should end the conversation.

## Voice Is All You Have Got

When you talk to someone in a face-to-face setting, how much of the communication message do you think is conveyed just by what you say—the words that you use? Do you think 50 percent of the message is conveyed through your words? Eighty percent? Thirty percent? Studies show that only 7 percent of a message is conveyed through the words that you use. Another 38 percent is carried by your tone of voice. The remaining 55 percent is conveyed through body language.

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2. Ricky W. Telg, assistant professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

Guess what is not available when you are on the telephone: body language, and that accounts for more than half of the communication message that is conveyed. You have to make up that missing 55 percent when you are on the telephone through your voice. How do you do that?

For one, when the phone rings, be ready. Be prepared to talk. Give your attention to the caller—the **customer**. Set aside whatever you are doing and focus on what the caller is saying. Ask clarifying questions: “Do you want the dean or the assistant dean?” Paraphrase their comments so you understand what the caller means. Interact and verbally encourage the caller. Summarize the conversation to clear up any areas of misunderstanding. Although the caller can not see them, use body gestures—body language. Gestures allow you to be more expressive and more animated in your conversation.

Also pay attention to your **vocal quality**, consisting of **rate**, **pitch**, **volume**, **clarity**, and **tone**. Is your voice **rate** too fast or too slow? The average speech rate is 140 words per minute. Fast talkers come across as untrustworthy or too busy to talk. Callers may think of slow talkers as mentally slow. **Pitch** is the highness or lowness of your voice. High-pitched talkers tend to grate on people’s nerves, while low-pitched talkers sound mechanical, almost robotic. **Volume** is how loud or soft you talk. Loud people are perceived as brash and overbearing; soft speakers are seen as shy and wimpy. **Clarity** takes in how your words are understood. Do you articulate your words or do you slur them together? A problem in the South is dropping end consonants (“drop-pin” for “dropping”) or mispronouncing some words (“git” for “get”). Lastly, **tone** is the expressiveness in your voice. It makes up 38 percent of the communication message, so make it count. Be expressive.

## The Complaint Call

Complaint callers who are irate are really saying, “I rate.” They have bought into society’s “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” mentality. When that happens, try the **EAR** method (which makes sense, since this document discusses answering telephone calls, listening, and responding):

- Empathize with the caller.
- Apologize and acknowledge the problem.
- Accept Responsibility. (You will do something.)

**Empathize with the caller.** This is different from *sympathy*, where you take on someone else’s problem. Try to understand how the person is feeling.

**Apologize and acknowledge the problem.** You do not have to agree with the caller, but express regret that there is a problem. People want to be heard, and no one’s complaint is trivial. Each deserves prompt handling, so do not deal with it in a trivial manner.

**Accept responsibility.** Make sure something is done. Take it upon yourself to DO something. Many times, that is all that people want: the reassurance that something will be done. People want to be helped. They want to know that you care. Use these phrases to get that sentiment across: “How can I help you?” “What can I do for you?” “I’ll make sure this message/information gets to the right person.”

The acceptance of responsibility may be as simple as forwarding the call to the appropriate individual or sending the caller more information. If you do forward the caller to someone else on your staff, follow up with that person to make sure the caller was taken care of.

And in your responses, avoid these *forbidden* phrases:

- **“I don’t know.”** It sounds as if you’re closing the door on the caller or that you’re not sure what’s going on in your own office. Better to say: “That’s a good question. Let me check and find out.”
- **“We can’t do that.”** This sentence is extremely negative. Be positive. Try this: “That’s a tough one. Let’s see what we can do.”
- **“You’ll have to...”** sounds accusatory. Try instead: “Here’s how we can help you.”
- **“No,”** when it begins any sentence. It sounds as though you’re not willing to help. You may not be able to do **one** thing, but you can do *something*. “We aren’t able to do that, but we can....” (Because there’s **always** something you can do.)

If you get an irate caller, or even one who is calm, cool, and collected, here are some more methods to handle complaint calls:

First, do not overreact, especially if the caller starts using “*trigger*” words or phrases, such as: “I want to talk to someone who **knowssomething**.” Most people respond by getting defensive when their “hot-button words” are pressed. **Remember, a positive attitude is the most important asset you have.**

Second, listen completely to the complaint. Allow the caller the opportunity to vent some frustration. When you listen, do not try to apply logic to the situation. Many people are

beyond logic if they are angry, so accept the feelings being expressed. Avoid argument and criticism.

Third, do not blame anyone -- the caller, yourself, or someone on your staff -- even if you **know** who is to blame for a problem. This information should not be shared with the caller.

Fourth, paraphrase the caller's comments and ask questions if you do not understand the information being presented to you. Restate the problem as you understand it.

Fifth, offer solutions and, if appropriate, offer alternatives. Providing alternatives empowers callers. It gives callers a feeling that they were not dictated to and that they were part of the solution.

Finally, confirm the solution with the caller. Make sure the caller agrees with what has been decided.

Of course, not everyone will be happy, no matter what you do. These people will not be content; they just like being grumpy. Usually, these are the people who want to talk to the person "above you." If that is what it takes to lessen their anger, then do so. By the time they have been transferred to a supervisor, they usually have become calmer and less demanding. It seems that they just needed to vent their anger at someone: you. Just remember that most people are not that way and keep a firm grip on that positive attitude of yours.

## Swearers

There is one small group of irate callers that has to be addressed here: the swearer. You may not get swearers very often, but when you do, here are a couple of suggestions to handle them:

First, call attention to the swearer's vulgar language by saying, "Sir/madam, I can handle your problem, but I am not able to handle the swearing. I respectfully ask that you stop." In most instances, making callers aware of what they are saying will halt the swearing. However, if it does not stop, this author advocates the "three strikes and you're out" rule. If you ask the person to stop swearing twice more and the caller does not, then hang up. Three strikes, the caller is out, hang up. No one should have to listen to verbal abuse. Of course, make sure this advice is in keeping with your office's protocol when handling a swearer. If your office does not have one, discuss it with your supervisor and get one in place.

## A Final Word...

This fact sheet discussed methods to handle complaint telephone calls. When you receive a complaint call, remember to lend an **EAR**—**E**mpathize with the caller, **A**pologize and acknowledge the problem, and accept **R**esponsibility.

Handling any telephone call—whether complaint or regular calls—means respecting others. It's the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do to you. If you keep that in mind, you should effectively handle all telephone calls with poise.