

Call Center Cinderella, Part II

The Missing Slipper: Essential Arts and Skills for Great Customer Conversations

By Edward G. Brown and Johanna Lubahn
Cohen Brown Management Group, Inc.

In an impersonal, impatient world accustomed to emotionless interactions but craving the opposite, are you setting the standards high enough for your call center? Do your reps know how to find the right words, use the right tone, convey authentic emotion, and make sincere connections with your customers?

If not, this paper will show you why it is essential that you equip them to do so, and how some industry leaders are already doing so.



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Cinderella Still...

Five years ago, in Call Center Cinderella Part I, we asked, “Is Your Biggest Branch Your Best Kept Secret?”

We pointed out the call center’s vital roles in a company’s fortunes (driving revenue, and creating, building and improving relationships). And yet, we noted that call centers often get second-class treatment compared to other channels: inferior facilities, training, compensation, and so on. Like Cinderella banished to the cinders, call centers are woefully undervalued, so their potential is often squandered.

Now in Part II, “The Missing Slipper: Essential Arts and Skills for Great Customer Conversations,” we spotlight what has gone missing from call centers: **skilled delivery of authentic, human emotion**. While call centers have been making heroic gains of one kind (technology and productivity), they have been losing another kind (establishing a genuine emotional connection with customers).

And like Cinderella’s forlorn prince left holding a single slipper, the half they lack is the better half!

Unlike the prince, however, many call centers are not searching for the other slipper. In fact they appear oblivious to the loss and to an ironic parallel: While authentic, human emotion was being leached from call center conversations, customers were increasingly craving it. With online channels available for so many customer interactions today, customers who call in or answer their own phone are all but begging, “I want to talk to somebody who wants to talk to me.”

Let’s be clear: This is *not* a screed against bad call center reps. On the contrary, we admire call center workers. We are call center idealists. We know of gems of call center excellence in the business world, and we think all companies can emulate them.

But first it is necessary to see clearly how and why this essential profession has tumbled, in three or four fast decades, from a golden age of telephone customer service to one sorely lacking in the most basic “essential arts and skills for holding great customer conversations.”

Oh, and by the way, we keep saying call centers, but every single employee speaks for the company—CEO, auditor, security guard, software tester, web editor—everyone. The same high standards are demanded of all.

So before reading further, you might want to check your own voicemail message that callers hear. Does it, in every way—words, tone, pace, emotion—signal to the listener that your company is one of professional, customer-focused, warm, authentic, positive, intelligent people?

That, and nothing less, can and should be the standard for your call center’s conversations.

“While authentic, human emotion was being leached from call center conversations, customers were increasingly craving it.”





“He Died. He Died of a Heart Attack.”

*A poignant scene opens the movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. Newly widowed Mrs. Greenslade (Judy Dench) is on the phone with technical support, trying to find out how to reactivate an account.*

“I don’t have the password,” she explains, “because the person who opened this account isn’t here.”

The rep at the other end of the phone advises, “Madam, just call back when you get the password.”

Dench takes a deep breath and chokes out, “But it was my husband, and he died. He died of a heart attack.”

Without a pause, the rep repeats, “Madam, just call us back when you have the password.”

“Most of us have had call center interactions that omit the meagerest manners or empathy.”

Now that’s colder than cold. But honestly, is it unusual? We know there are excellent exceptions, but most of us have had call center interactions that omit the meagerest manners or empathy. We’ve had our convivial remarks met with squelching indifference. We are blandly asked to stay on the line to complete a customer satisfaction survey when it’s obvious we are still unhelped, still peeved. If we don’t get angry, it’s only because we no longer expect a satisfying conversation with the call center.

So Mrs. Greenslade’s rebuff is not an anomaly, but it does raise a serious question: How did such a gross misuse of corporate resources come to pass? How do big corporations, after investing so much in customer service, keep delivering all this indifference, insincerity, and impoliteness? Why do people hired for the sole purpose of talking to customers fail so badly at basic, decent, human communication?

It is not because they really *are* indifferent, insincere, or impolite. Recruiters can screen out obvious misfits. The answer is that they fail simply because they do not possess the arts and skills of conversing with customers. They may be well trained in many aspects of their job—the technology, scripts, and telephony. But they are not trained to be empathetic, authentic, and polite.

Even those who arrive on the job possessing those qualities often discard them when the scripting won’t accommodate them or the training devalues them. We spend a lot of time in call centers and never cease to be amazed at this common scenario: We wait for a rep to finish a customer call. When she does so and greets us, it’s hard to believe that this agreeable, smiling, polite, voluble person is the same one who just subjected her customer to a bored recital of an impersonal script and a rushed sign-off. Her polite personality was there all along, emerging easily for our benefit. It just went missing from the customer equation.

That’s what this paper is about: how you can restore authenticity to the call center conversation. In an impersonal, impatient world accustomed to emotionless interactions but craving the opposite, the missing slipper is the essential arts and skills for holding great customer conversations.



Questions for Call Center Leaders

1. What communication skills are most important to you?
2. Do you consistently model them for your teams?
3. Do you believe these skills can be taught?
4. Do you consistently train and certify all levels on communication skills?
5. Ideally, what should have been said to Mrs. Greenslade? How many of your reps would have said it?

Right Words, Wrong Music

“She has the words, but not the music,” said Mark Twain of his wife’s attempts at swearing. When your call center reps talk to customers, is what they say undermined by *how* they say it? Do your carefully prepared scripts actually convey what you intend?

For an upset customer calling about a surprise fee, your script might prescribe a polite proposal: “Let me explain that fee.” But how those five words are delivered can dramatically change the nature of the interaction. It could sound helpful and empathetic. Uttered for the twentieth time in an hour, it could sound weary, or impatient. Or to a confused customer it could sound condescending. The difference is not negligible: either the customer breathes a sigh of relief that professional help is at hand, or feels insulted or patronized.

Words matter. Call centers depend on words. The script is their currency; their words the unit of value. But words presuppose meaning; scripts assume words will be delivered with appropriate tone, emotion, and sincerity. The purpose of the script is to produce a particular outcome—an informed customer, a mollified customer, a successful sale, or a need uncovered.

So what happens when the purpose of the script is, well, the script itself? We were stunned the first time we saw this: call center reps instructed to actually read the script that appears on the screen. Not take their cues from it, not learn it and make it their own, but actually read it. Later we had to ask their manager: You mean you are paying adults to come to work and read from a script? Not use their personalities, not engage in a conversation, but read off a screen?

Yes, they were, and now we see it happening more frequently—call centers that have abandoned even a pretense of humanness or authenticity. Wouldn’t robots be better? The customer would be served no worse, and no employee would be demeaned.

To better understand the prevalence of the problem of the missing slipper, we decided to mystery shop institutions where we are individual customers: our phone company, our insurance company, our bank, and so on—big companies with big investments in their call centers. We wanted to gauge the extent to which the reps matched tone and emotion to words. Did they sound concerned about our problem, enthusiastic about solving it, sincere about valuing our business—not excessively, just normally? In other words, did they sound like people talking to people?

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“We didn’t set out to be hard graders, but not one mystery shop went well. Even on the bare basics of sounding professional and human they came up short.”

We didn’t set out to be hard graders, but not one mystery shop went well. Forget about the techniques we would have liked to find: smiling with the voice, calming our concerns, mirroring our emotions, dialoguing vs. monologuing, and using etiquette. Even on the bare basics of sounding professional and human they came up short. Across the board, they came across as insincere, unprepared, and bored.

And keep in mind these were extensively trained employees with precise, consistent scripts, talking to customers who they knew were valuable. The reps knew the importance of saying the right thing, and they said it. But their training obviously neglected *how* to say it. Is it any wonder customers feel dread or resignation when they have to press 1-800?

Questions for Call Center Leaders

1. Do you personally set the tone in your center to have cheerful, courteous reps?
2. When it’s time for the new scripts, do you discuss with your team *how* to say them?
3. How do you help your team stay engaged throughout the entire call and on every call?

Who Cares?

So what? So what if the lady at the phone company sounds bored as she takes the mistaken fee off your bill? Who cares if your insurance company’s rep says “Thanks for giving us your business” with all the gratitude of, “Thanks for giving me your cold”?

After all, these are *businesses*—these are phone reps, not therapists. You know management has them focused on being efficient. If efficiency (which probably saves you money) gets in the way of a little TLC, are you really that tender? Harry Truman famously said, “If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog.” If people are dismayed by the curt or bored tone in a commercial transaction with an otherwise competent stranger whom they’ll never encounter again, shouldn’t they get a dog or over it?

Should or not, they don’t. J. D. Power and Associates regularly researches customer satisfaction. Their most recent survey of drivers of call center customer satisfaction found this: ***The top driver of call center customer satisfaction is “the courtesy of the representative”.***

Courtesy. Not promptness, not accuracy, not swift resolution. Courtesy. Taking time for minor rituals, using old-fashioned phrases, heeding the other person’s comfort. People acknowledging one another as people first—then as customers, or people with a problem, or people to be sold, but first and foremost as people.

But where are the courtesy classes? Where is the Golden Headphone Award for The Most Courteous Rep? If you were to ask your own reps, “What is your main responsibility?” how many would say “courtesy”? If they didn’t say courtesy, would

they mention speed? If so, what's the first thing sacrificed by people in a hurry? Courtesy.

J.D. Power and Associates also measures how the drivers of call center customer satisfaction change over time. This year their research revealed that promptness and knowledge grew *less* important to customers. What grew much, much *more* important? Concern. J.D. Power writes, "...Unless concern is demonstrated, knowledge is irrelevant." In tough economic times, they conclude, concern is more important than ever, and lack of concern is further evidence of the slipper gone missing.

There's another factor at work in elevating the importance of concern and courtesy: alternative channels. Company web sites let customers manage their routine issues and transactions. Auto-response systems efficiently answer frequently asked questions. So it's reasonable to assume that when callers battle through the phone tree long enough to show they really want to speak to a rep, they really want a human interaction, i.e., a courteous, concerned person.

A colleague has to make frequent, sudden trips across the country to attend a chronically ill relative. Asked how he could afford the ghastly prices of last-minute airline tickets, he said, "I just skip the airline web site and call them. And if the person who answers doesn't sound nice, I just say good-bye and call back until I reach somebody who does. Somebody who is nice is somebody who will do their best for me. Even if I don't get a better deal it will be a pleasant transaction." This colleague is a seasoned business executive, thick-skinned in the business world, certainly able to tolerate a surly agent, but he gets the connection between the rep's courtesy/concern and his own best interest.

His experience validates another J.D. Powers finding that because of "tools to allow better, more efficient transfer of product/service knowledge to customers...there is less need for the CSR to have transactional knowledge, which reduces its impact on the overall call experience." This raises the impact of the rep's concern and courtesy. Before our friend calls the airline, he says, "I already know the rules from the web site—if my old ticket can be used, or how much the change should cost me. But I'm looking for help, not rules, and a good rep who *wants* to help can always do something."

He is right. What is the point of spending time, money and effort on having people available to talk to customers, unless they really talk like people?

Of course we realize that call centers were invented to help companies cut the cost of customer service. It makes sense to centralize people in lower-cost facilities, standardize their knowledge, and manage their call queues with technology and recorded messages. Those are efficient strategies for companies facing constant cost pressure. But why even have live people if you are not going to help them deliver a customer experience that reflects well on the company and on them?

So, to answer the question at the outset of this section, these arts and skills matter from several perspectives.

"When callers battle through the phone tree long enough to show they really want to speak to a rep, they really want a human interaction."



They matter because in this highly automated world, sometimes people still need reassurance that their assumptions are correct, that their problem will be resolved, or that they can ask questions that are not answered on the company website. They want to hear the assurance in someone's voice. Who hasn't carried on a largely email correspondence with a close relative, friend or colleague, and on finding just a slightly odd tone in the last missive, picked up the phone to ask, "Are you okay? Just checking. I couldn't be sure from your last note." When written words aren't enough, a voice is necessary.

These arts and skills are personally important to the reps themselves. Those not trained in matching words to meaning cannot enjoy their work. People don't want to spend their working hours in a flat, inauthentic, uncaring mode. In the course of our research we did an internet search for "I hate my call center," but it spontaneously offered "I hate my call center *job*" and coughed up 24,400,000 hits! Many call centers have high turnover for the simple fact that reps who don't have the communication skills to improve the customer experience don't like their jobs. As the friend who seeks out "nice"-sounding airline agents says, "I'm not the only one who gets a good experience. Good reps want to feel like they matter, too." Good reps regret the missing slipper, too.

So, call center turnover remains high (around 40%) despite a heavy focus from companies that realize the cost of turnover averages around \$6,000 per representative, and—not to put too fine a point on it—this in an industry created to manage costs!

Communication arts and skills matter because they create a fertile ground for a relationship; otherwise the calls are just a series of transactions. A bored insurance agent who adds your son as a driver on your car policy forgoes a great chance for cross-sales if he doesn't use the occasion to ask about other changes in your household that might be cross-sale opportunities. When will your son get a car of his own? Has he picked a college? Will he need renters insurance? How about just a simple, "Congratulations to him!"

As the movie *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* develops, the new widow Mrs. Greenslade finds herself counseling call center reps on making human, *humane* connections with their customers. The reps are thrilled to learn, but their manager, a clock-watcher, is skeptical: politeness eats up precious seconds. But Mrs. Greenslade converts him with role-play that shows a humane interaction smoothly producing a contented customer who is not only willing but eager to listen to a sales pitch.

As for the notion that these skills won't matter long—that social media will replace the call center, consider this from Bruce Cantor, Customer Management IQ:

"No matter the demographic, as it stands, only a small minority of customers currently prefer using social media for customer service. The new TNS and Sitel study reports that 15% of customers aged 16—24 favor the channel for service inquiries, as compared with 8% for 25—34 and just 3% for 35—44.

"Based on that line of data, the claim that social media is quickly turning the call center into a relic seems preposterous. If even the high school- and college-aged customers who literally grew up with Facebook have not made

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social media their customer support avenue of choice, how could an organization even consider scaling back its emphasis on the traditional contact center?”

As for the majority of younger customers who avoid the call center and first seek an online solution, maybe it's not about the allure of all things internet. We are not of that demographic, but of an age that distinctly remembers the golden age of telephone service, before annoying phone trees and bland messages that our call is “important.” Is it possible those young people avoid the call center simply because they came along too late to know there *is* such a thing as a great customer conversation over the phone?

As people, we expect respect and appreciate empathy not because we feel deserving as customers but because we believe we are deserving as *people*—no matter the interaction. If we are caught speeding, we still expect a courteous police officer and resent a sarcastic one. Our expectations don't rise or fall on the size of the transaction; picking up a gallon of milk at the all-night gas station entitles us to the same friendly thank-you as a buying new computer from the Apple store.

What happens when we don't get it? The same thing that happens when we are rebuffed in a personal situation. We guard against giving them another chance to disappoint us. In a customer context, that means we don't come back, or we limit further purchases. We don't recommend them when asked, and we tell others of the bad experience. When the slipper goes missing, so does our loyalty.

Five Things Customers Always Want

Years ago we did research to determine “The Five Things Customers Always Want,” and our latest findings show no change. Note the “always”—we don't use that word lightly. Contravening these five things even once depreciates the customer's regard for the company:

1. Show that you value me.
2. Create a positive environment.
3. Understand my needs and look after them.
4. Make it easy for me to do business with you.
5. Be responsive in solving my problems and answering my questions.

Take the first one, “Show that you value me.” Articulate what you know about my relationship with your company, and how you value it. Say it with sincerity instead of rushing into your perfunctory script to get me off the phone. If I have a substantial relationship with you, thank me for it. If I am new with you, help me become familiar with all your services, but show me, tell me that you value me; don't make me guess that you do. If I've been your credit card customer since 1986, it's okay to sound impressed when you mention it. If I just signed up for your cable service, put some energy in your welcome to me. For the moment, you are the sole representative of your whole company for me.

“As people, we expect respect and appreciate empathy not because we feel deserving as customers but because we believe we are deserving as *people*—no matter the interaction.”



“Understanding needs and looking after them sounds so obvious. But if reps aren’t trained in how to do that in specific situations, that slipper can go missing in a hurry.”

The second one, creating a positive environment is the rep’s job. Good business and bad vibes don’t go together. No mystery how to be positive: no negatives. Eradicate them from the call center vocabulary. Don’t say no, not, never, wrong, mistake, or problem. Not “I can’t help you” but “May I tell you how we can get you some help?” Not “You’ve reached the wrong department.” Not “You don’t understand what I’m trying to say.” Not “It’s complicated.” For every negative-sounding word or phrase, there are positive alternatives. Find them, practice them, and use them. And remember, positive is a tone, too, not just words.

The third one, understanding needs and looking after them, sounds so obvious. But if reps aren’t trained in how to do that in specific situations, that slipper can go missing in a hurry. If the customer makes it clear he is in a hurry, but the rep presses him to stay on the phone to complete a satisfaction survey, his needs just got shelved. His irritation erases any good will from the previous transaction. Just as offensive is indiscriminate pitching of product. Nothing tells a customer his needs are irrelevant like getting an offer for something he’s not remotely interested in.

Fourth, make it easy for me to do business with you. Your business is complicated. I don’t care what business you are in or how simple it looks from your side; customers don’t want to and shouldn’t have to figure it out. Don’t ask them if they are a Preferred or Priority Preferred or Premium Preferred customer. I don’t know if my cable package is Standard Plus or Standard Star. If those things matter before you can help me, have your own way of knowing them. If your call center handles technical matters, teach your reps how to identify a caller’s technical level from their words, and match their own language accordingly.

The last one—answer questions, solve problems—again sounds so obvious, but how many times have you found yourself, saying “No, no, that’s not what I asked.” If the caller asks how to do something on your web site, and the rep says it’s easier if I just take your order over the phone, the rep might mean well, but still annoy the customer, who obviously wanted to use the web site, not the call center.

What if the problem cannot be solved in a single call? Do your reps know how to leave the customer satisfied with the planned follow-up? Can they confidently explain what needs to happen and do it in words and tone that assure the customer his problem matters?

No matter which of these customer wants reps are dealing with at any given time, it is impossible to do so effectively if the rep is not trained to detect feelings and respond with feeling, and instead relies on technical solutions to do the job. Feelings are powerful. What customers feel about any given product or situation carries as much weight as any technical facts of the matter. They know things can go wrong with a service or product. When they raise an error or complaint, a simple expression of regret and empathy can restore their equanimity.

A friend’s ATM card expired while she was on vacation, leaving her broke, cadging cash and unable to buy some much-desired souvenirs. On her return, she reported the experience at the branch. The teller said, “No problem, we usually mail a new one a month ahead of expiration, but that associate there can take care of it for you.” The associate heard the story and said cheerfully, “This will only take a few minutes.” The branch manager overheard and briskly assured her that she could use the card right away. By then my friend was vexed, more than she had been at

the original mistake, and said, “I knew I could get a new card, but I expected an apology for what I went through.” The manager was aggrieved and snapped, “Ma’am, I’m sorry but I don’t know what more do you expect us to do!”

“I’m sorry *but*” is the anti-apology. It acknowledges the need for an apology while evading responsibility for offering one. What the customer obviously expected was a dose of empathy—for the first, second, or third branch employee to take five seconds to look at her and say, “I am so sorry. I can tell that was very inconvenient for you.” Then they would have been assisting a mollified customer instead of an increasingly irritated one. But the missing slipper was so thoroughly absent that three well-trained, well-meaning employees, watching a customer’s irritation mount, never even thought of responding with feeling, only with, “You’ll soon have your card.”

In other words, you can technically meet every goal you set for your customer interactions, but if you have a mismatch between words and tone—if the authentic emotions aren’t there or are not skillfully conveyed—the technical competence is all for nothing. Great communication skills are the tipping point for each of them.

Questions for Call Center Leaders

1. What aspect do you focus on more in your team meetings, speed or courtesy?
2. Can your team members name five ways to convey courtesy on their calls?
3. Can your team members deliver an effective apology when it’s needed?

Who Lost the Slipper?

With all the negative consequences of the missing slipper, it’s fair to ask, how did we get here? No one would say, “Yes, we set out to drain emotion and authenticity out of our customer interactions. We would just as soon sound bored, impatient, whatever.”

On the contrary, most people, call center reps included, probably set out to have decent interactions with customers. Certainly company after company would claim some version of, “Customer satisfaction is our top priority.” We see it emblazoned on signs in call centers that we visit.

The slipper went missing through benign neglect. That’s the simple answer—communication arts and skills need to be cultivated. They are not innate, but need to be taught and practiced. And once taught, they need to be cultivated, or they will dissipate. When managers neglect them, there are many reasons.

They get diverted by the need for speed. Even after all these years and all the talk of customer satisfaction, what is the call center’s main measurement tool? The clock. Right up there next to the sign about customer satisfaction is a big digital clocking ticking off how long each rep has been on the call.

“You can technically meet every goal you set for your customer interactions, but if you have a mismatch between words and tone, the technical competence is all for nothing.”

We know what we do when the clock is ticking. We hurry. We cut corners. We sound impatient. That would be the wrong time to sit us down and urge us to chill, and smile while you're at it. But isn't that what we do with our reps when we put them on the clock, and then expect them to listen empathetically and have composed, thoughtful, sincere conversations?

They don't believe. Sometimes management is skeptical, telling us, "This can't be taught. Some people have empathy or charisma or whatever you want to call it, and some people don't. They don't want to fake it, and I don't want to make them."

That's good; faking it is no better than tanking it. But why are professional actors so good? Do they fake it, or do they inhabit a role so thoroughly that when watching them we "willingly suspend our disbelief"? Doctors take classes on bedside manner, not to give a phony impersonation of a compassionate person but to understand the patient's perspective enough to activate authentic compassion. They learn to convey their scientific insights in the language of the patient, to adjust their demeanor differently for patients versus medical colleagues.

Learning how to infuse your voice and words with concern or enthusiasm or whatever the situation requires is not a ploy. It is rising to the highest standards of your profession by understanding how your customers wish to be treated and treating them that way.

USAA, the preeminent insurer of military personnel and perennial customer service champion, knows no bounds when it comes to customer empathy as the prerequisite for sincerity versus phoniness. USAA trainees dine on MREs (meals ready to eat), the same food soldiers get in the field. In training, they strap on military helmets, flak vests and heavy field packs. They read real letters from troops at the front lines. According to an article by Bain and Company, "USAA instills the military values of honesty, integrity, loyalty, and service in all its employees. Every individual goes through an orientation process to learn military culture and nomenclature, including ranks, service branches, and history."

No faking required or desired. Just sincerity—authentic emotion that is honestly felt, appropriate to the occasion, and thoughtfully articulated.

They think it's too elementary. Call center managers sometimes object, "These are grown-ups. It's childish to make them practice talking with a smile in their voice. And they already know they are supposed to sound polite and friendly—I'm not going to insult them by drilling them in such basics."

There will be reps who say:

"I've been talking to people all my life—I don't need lessons in how to do that—just tell me what to say."

"You mean pretend I have a personal concern about a commercial transaction? I'd rather just sound *professional*" (which often turns out to mean crisply efficient but distant).

"Good grief —I'm just an anonymous person on the phone—let's not pretend I'm a doctor or something. *It's a job, not a profession...*"

"Doctors take classes on bedside manner, not to give a phony impersonation of a compassionate person but to understand the patient's perspective enough to activate authentic compassion."

Great reps *are* the epitome of professional, maintaining their standards no matter how difficult the circumstances.

But how reasonable is it to expect people to be good at critical arts and skills if they don't know the rudiments and haven't practiced them in pressure situations?

Even in our personal lives, we all know the power and rarity of the sincere apology. If it's rare in regular life, why should it suddenly be common in the call center? If people are not good at apologizing at home, they won't magically become good at apologizing to customers. If they don't know, they need to be told: how to word an apology, what sincerity sounds like, what *insincerity* sounds like, how to be specific, what words subtract from sincerity.

Who would deny that many people are etiquette-challenged? And yet as we learned earlier, courtesy is the number one driver of customer satisfaction. Knowing that, it is only responsible to define what you mean by courtesy, to spell out what different situations require in the way of courteous words, courteous listening, and courteous tone, and to practice remaining courteous despite pressure and temptation to the contrary. What are the odds that your diverse staff, no matter how well intentioned, would otherwise consistently and cheerfully satisfy customers' deep desire for courtesy?

They are influenced by social media. Social media plays a huge and often critical role in advancing communication. But it can also promote habits inimical to professionalism, accuracy, authenticity, thoughtfulness—all qualities essential to great customer communication.

The broadcast quality of Facebook encourages indifference to the audience. Posters post without contemplating (caring?) how all the different people who will see it will react. Who hasn't been taken aback to see a sketchy posting by a colleague? Or embarrassed by glimpses of somebody's too-personal issues? Or bemused by somebody's obsession about what appears to be nonsense? Facebook says, "Take it or leave it, everybody. This is me." Thoughtful communicators ask, "How do I prepare myself—words, voice, tone, volume, pace, all of it—so that my communication conveys what it should and so that you experience it the way I intend?"

Twitter demands another communication habit that texting was already perfecting—extreme brevity. Brevity may be "the soul of wit" but wit isn't what customers are begging for. Tweeters meet the demand by unlovely abbreviations and omissions, adding up to bad grammar and, well, rank rudeness. Put "hello, please, how are you, thank you, and good-bye," in your tweet and there goes almost one third of Twitter's allotted 140 characters. Not exactly a vessel for politeness.

With Twitter, there's also a premium on immediacy—the snappy critique, the zippy comeback, the put-down that squelches dissent. Not exactly the top tools for relationship-building, problem-solving, or product-selling.

The habits that social media prize and promote are often the opposite of the arts and skills for great customer conversations.

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They forget their power. Sometimes call center leaders, after years of operating in such high-pressure environments and meeting ever rising standards of speed and efficiency, are so overwhelmed that they forget their awesome influence. They forget that they and their reps really have the power to change people’s lives—their own and those of their customers.

We will never forget our biggest epiphany on the power of communication arts and skills. We were training newly hired reps from Libya, Syria, and Pakistan. After the class, one male student confided why he was so thrilled to learn this: “My family and I live in a one-bedroom apartment with eleven other people. I think if I do what you tell me, I will earn my incentives and be able to move my family to a two bedroom apartment.” Another man confided, “I will be able to buy my first car.” He was 40 years old.

If those life-changing circumstances don’t create enthusiasm about the power of doing this job well, nothing will. These are life-changing arts and skills for the reps. If you as a call center leader can change their lives that much for the better, imagine how much more value they will willingly, selflessly bring you and your customers.

Questions for Call Center Leaders

1. How do you ensure people at all levels are not just going through the motions?
2. Do you certify teams at all levels on their communication arts and skills?
3. How often do you conduct refreshers on the separate arts and skills?

Finding the Missing Slipper: Leading the Change

This is a great place to stop reading this paper. What follows is precisely what you need to do if you want to distinguish your company from the competition with excellent communication arts and skills.

But excellence doesn’t come easy. It derives from a firm commitment to a sustained culture change—changing people’s individual beliefs, desires, habits, countenances, and voices. If their sincere, emotional communication is your goal for your call center, imagine how much sincerity and emotion is required of you.

You should expect regular pressure to revert to old ways, pressure that tempts even a customer experience model like Apple. Qaalfa Dibeethi writes on BeyondPhilosophy.com:

“Most people in customer experience will hold Apple up as one of the stalwarts of good customer experience across industry. However...Apple may be shifting gears away from its strong focus on the customer experience towards a push sell strategy.... So the gamble, if one is indeed being taken, is to risk current and proven gold standard performance based on customer experience principles for a hypothetical boost in profitability that hardly materialised in any sustainable way for large electronics retailers where this strategy has been practiced.”

But communication arts and skills can be embedded in your culture. We have helped many do it with uplifting results—but it can't be done without wholehearted commitment of leaders. Just proclaiming it as a new, required program is a waste of time and energy. Leaders have to follow up, be attuned to subtleties, and be willing to coach at the most minute level on all kinds of details, no matter where they arise.

A recent article extolled how a much-admired company rigorously trains its frontline personnel: prohibited words, gestures, and body language. But it was followed by this abrupt reader comment: "You can spot the technique a mile away!" Techniques are for learning, not for display. If you teach your reps techniques for calming angry customers, the last thing you want them to do is signal that "now I'm going to calm you down with a few well-chosen words." Leaders need to be willing to rehearse and rehearse—as often as it takes.

Our chairman had noticed that one of our top consultants, an articulate, engaging person with stellar client relationships, nevertheless had trouble discussing contract details with prospects.

He told her, "When you say the price, your voice drops off; your rate of speech slows. You go from confident to timid when you hit the numbers. Just when you are saying what the customer has been waiting anxiously to hear, you falter. Inadvertently, you give the impression that you don't believe in its value, leaving the customer uncertain, just when he needs confidence in you to proceed with his big decision."

He was right. She was uncomfortable at that juncture in contract conversations. But just telling her that changed nothing—she tried to improve but did not. So he gave her techniques. "Tell me your phone number. Again. Listen to how you sounded. Now say the dollar figures that way." Then he rehearsed her repeatedly until she could discuss contract numbers as confidently as she said her phone number or discussed the benefits of her programs.

Imagine doing that with your reps, all of them, across the board. Imagine that becoming your top priority. That's leading the change to essential communication arts and skills.

Top Ten Arts and Skills

If you are still reading (thank you!), in this section we have categorized the essential communication arts and skills into ten top skills that tend to go missing.

1. It's Always Opening Night

Even when reps are thoroughly skilled and practiced in all the communication arts we teach and can deliver a great experience almost effortlessly, there's still one more thing to be practiced: constancy. Professional actors hold themselves to an incredibly high standard: *Every time you step on that stage it is Opening Night. That is somebody's first Broadway show and somebody's last Broadway show. Make it count.*

"Techniques are for learning, not for display. If you teach your reps techniques for calming angry customers, the last thing you want them to do is signal that 'now I'm going to calm you down with a few well-chosen words.'"

“When reps are tired, when they have a headache, when the customer is frosty, when the system is balky, when there’s no good solution—it is still Opening Night for each caller.”

We call that the “Opening Night Principle,” and it is indeed a principle, not just a guideline. Reps need to deliver a great conversation even when they don’t feel like it. When they are tired, when they have a headache, when the customer is frosty, when the system is balky, when there’s no good solution—it is still Opening Night for each caller.

We teach that technique in multiple ways. Just a reminder is not enough; it is a holistic thing. Take a look around at your reps. If they are slumping in their chairs, chin in hand, if their supervisors are hovering, anxious about the length of the call—those customers are not getting an Opening Night experience. If the reps are animated, smiling, leaning forward into the call—that’s probably an Opening Night call.

This can be a difficult learning experience for reps whose lives have not accustomed them to overcome adverse emotional situations. They don’t quite believe they can control their emotions and influence callers’ emotions. So when they do learn it, it’s life-changing for them. They have a new skill that will serve them in difficulties of all kinds for the rest of their lives.

2. Be a Great Listener

Our clients are sometimes nonplussed when we announce that “listening” will be an actual class. How hard can listening be? Pay attention to what the customer says, and don’t interrupt, right?

For call center reps, as for the rest of humanity, good listening is a set of active participatory practices. The other day we sat at a sidewalk café and watched a person on the street give directions to a tourist. It was at once the most ordinary of interactions and at the same time an elaborate pas de deux of verbal, facial, and hand cues, quite aside from the actual directions which we could not hear. Tentative pointing, questioning looks, words repeated, firmer pointing, nodding, solicitude, gratitude, and finally smiles all around.

What we were watching were two people performing effective listening techniques as a matter of course; the local confirming where the tourist wanted to go, the tourist confirming the directions, the local elaborating, and both of them quickly acknowledging the other’s interjections.

But often in call centers, the lack of visual cues and the focus on the commercial nature of the transactions interrupts that natural back-and-forth. There’s silence when there should be acknowledgment. There’s replying when there should be restating. There’s interrupting and rushing. When that happens, reps need to be re-skilled in bringing back into their interactions what those two did effortlessly on the street and adapting them to the particular needs of their customers and company.

Hollywood heartthrob Clark Gable was asked for the secret to his success with women.

“They appreciate me for being a great conversationalist,” he replied.

“But what does it take to be a great conversationalist?”

“Be a great listener,” he said.

3. The Audible Smile

The audible smile is the telephone corollary to the adage that forcing a smile lifts your mood. Your smile changes your attitude and your voice. Science says that your smile triggers scientifically measurable activity in the area of your brain where happiness is registered. We're not brain scientists, but if just smiling makes you happier, how could the "sound" of your smile fail to have a salutary effect on the person hearing it?

Even over the phone, a smile can be detected and affect customers. It can calm fears, soothe anger, offer sympathy, soften resistance, and engender confidence. There are words that do this, too, but to be convincing, they need to be reinforced and validated by a corresponding emotion in the sound of a smile.

Again, this takes more than making a rule about smiling and reinforcing it with a smiley sign. Leaders can't just see a smile and assume customers are hearing it. They need to listen in on the calls, specifically listening for the sound of the smile. If it's not there, they need to coach—they can't just accept the rep's protest, "But that's how I sound when I smile." They have to be willing to say to the rep, "I can't hear it. Let's try that again."

4. Dialogue, Don't Monologue

Dialogue is a conversation monologue is a lecture. How many customers call for a lecture?

The best late-night comedians all open with a brief monologue, but then they turn to dialogue for most of the show. Why? Because what drives their ratings is their skill in conversing with guests, extracting from them what the audience wants to hear, making their guests comfortable in revealing themselves.

In call center conversations, the equivalent skill is prompting the customer to say things that will reveal how best to assist or answer them. The opposite is delivering a monologue that displays the rep's knowledge but precludes the customer from adding to it.

An acquaintance had repeated outages of his cable service. He realized, after repeated calls to the cable company, that his problem sounded like one that many customers had experienced from a botched switchover by the provider. But after repair visits from technicians, he also realized that his problem was different—it had nothing to do with that switchover. So in subsequent calls to report an outage, he would begin by saying, "First let me say, your repairmen have advised me that this problem is not related to the switchover..." But he never succeeded in diverting the rep from delivering the monologue that had evidently been scripted for the switchover problem.

Who knows how many customers that company lost because the reps were unwilling or unable to relinquish a script and convene a dialogue?

"If just smiling makes you happier, how could the "sound" of your smile fail to have a salutary effect on the person hearing it?"

“Sincerity isn’t a natural resource but a character trait. It is as learnable as any other virtue, like empathy, respect, generosity, and kindness.”

5. Consult, Don’t Interrogate

There’s a right way and a wrong way to probe customers for information that will allow the rep to assist or answer them. Consultative probing is thoughtful and respectful. Interrogation is not.

Who hasn’t called in with a problem and begun an explanation only to be interrupted with, “Account number? Mother’s maiden name?” Obviously, the rep needs that information, but the opening bars of any exchange set the tone for the entire conversation, and cutting off the customer is a bad start. Reps need to be skilled in diverting long-winded customers from their own monologues into having a fruitful exchange.

The right way involves acknowledging the customer’s problem, thanking them for the explanation, assuring them they are in good hands, and explaining that they would like a little background information first. “I will be glad to help you with those questions, and I’m glad you called. Now, may I ask you a couple of details before we go back to what you were describing?”

Some companies have evidently tried to avoid this problem by scripting the rep to say, on answering the call, “Hello, may I have your account number, please?” That solves the problem of having to interrupt the customer, but how do you imagine it makes the customer feel, after waiting patiently, to be queried instead of greeted? We can tell you: squelched and unimportant. It’s clear to the customer that the rep’s time and needs are more important than the customer’s.

6. Be Sincere

One of the stubbornest fallacies we encounter is that sincerity can’t be taught. If you don’t feel it, you can only deliver your best facsimile. We sincerely disagree. Sincerity isn’t a natural resource but a character trait. It is as learnable as any other virtue, like empathy, respect, generosity, and kindness.

A former bank executive we know was once a young bank manager with a particularly difficult customer. He was a law student who regularly tried to catch her staff out on arcane compliance items, and he was abusive and profane to them. After one particularly egregious incident, she told him his business was no longer welcome and closed his account. That evening her regional manager called and said the customer was going to sue because she hadn’t given him proper warning. She was to re-open his account and give the warning. *And* the customer was demanding that she personally apologize to him.

She did as asked, the apology unfeigned but delivered with all the professionalism she could muster. But the customer still fumed, “You don’t sound like you mean it,” and called her boss, still threatening to sue.

That evening, her epiphany didn’t come easily, but it came. She realized that from all the emotions surrounding the situation, she had to cultivate sincere regret and convey it to a bully, and do so convincingly. She had to put herself in his place, determine what he needed to experience, imagine what his behavior said about his emotional needs, and create that experience and those emotions.

It wasn't that hard once she realized it had to be done. And in subsequent training sessions she conveys the lesson to her teams this way:

"If you can't do it, you are in the wrong job. If you can't convey regret when it is called for, don't be a call center rep. If you can't feel and convey enthusiasm about your company's services, interest in customers, and empathy for their situations *on their timetable*, this isn't the job for you."

7. An Environment of Etiquette

I wish there were a different word for what we mean here. "Etiquette" has unfortunately taken on a connotation of pretension, or showy flourishes—something to be ridiculed, not emulated. We mean etiquette as a code of behavior based on respect and graciousness. We mean a consistent demonstration of respect and concern through words and actions—and even silences and inactions—that envelope the entire interaction. It leaves no room for anything untoward.

Etiquette comes naturally when we find ourselves in a situation where we are unfamiliar with the other people and yet want to make a good impression.

We were picnicking recently near two other groups. One group greeted each other with hugs, hearty backslaps, and nicknames. The other did so with handshakes, a lot of eye contact, and a lot of "May I..., would you..., please..., thank you..., Ms..., and Mr...." The second group was obviously people meeting for the first time, putting on their best manners, and showing care and concern for others. Their behavior came natural to them under the circumstances—they weren't being pretentious or showy.

That is the "natural" behavior that belongs in the call center, when reps are "meeting" the customer for the first time and when the customer needs to hear care and concern. When we teach this course, sometimes we get a little pushback: "That's not me I think people want a more 'real' person. That's why I use their first name and say 'okay' instead of 'thank you,' or 'no problem' instead of 'you're welcome.' That's the real me."

We acknowledge that there is a time and place for that kind of "being real," but it's among the rep's friends and family, not in the call center. Reps quickly learn that when they try our recommended approach. Not only do they find themselves feeling more professional and in charge of the conversation, they also quickly notice that customers follow their lead. Polite behaviors by the reps lead to more politeness from the customers. When etiquette takes over, it leaves no room for negative words or emotions.

8. Confidence

As much as customers want their problems solved or their questions answered, they also want to know they are dealing with "the right person". That means the person they speak to needs to be able to impart confidence, even in the middle of a lot of uncertainty.

"If you can't feel and convey enthusiasm about your company's services, interest in customers, and empathy for their situations on their timetable, this isn't the job for you."

“The ability to articulate intelligently and gracefully increases self-confidence and self-esteem; it reduces fear and anxiety.”

Reps have a lot to deal with—a lot that could impinge on their confidence: complicated systems, time pressures, lots of facts to learn, scripts to practice, difficult customers, and so on. So it is not surprising that many of them give off an aura of uncertainty from the very start of the conversation.

They need drilling in the words, phrases, and intonations that signal confidence. They need techniques for drawing confidence from what they *are* capable of, without being overwhelmed by what they are *not* capable of. They need to practice sounding confident and have their confidence rewarded with customers who are easier to deal with because they believe they are in good hands.

The ability to articulate intelligently and gracefully increases self-confidence and self-esteem; it reduces fear and anxiety.

9. No Jargon

If you have been in an elevator where the rest of the passengers were having a good time in a language you don't know, you know how off-putting that can be. That's what insider jargon does to customers. Jargon is natural in any company, and its use is largely benign within. But when customers encounter it, especially if they are already distressed or confused, it is one more hurdle.

When we call our health insurer, usually about a mailing we just received from them, many of their questions we can't answer because they use medical or insurance jargon. After a few go-rounds, we eventually square it all up when we get them to use lay language, but not until our anxiety has risen, our confidence has fallen, and we remember why we avoid dealing with them.

Sometimes jargon becomes so thoroughly ingrained in a company that reps don't even realize they are using it. If you understood what the customer said, don't play it back in your own company-speak. How could that be anything but irritating or patronizing? Instead, show the customer you were listening by playing back exactly what you heard. When you ask additional clarifying questions, match your language to theirs. Don't try to force them to use your terms unless it is vital in solving their problem, and if that's the case, explain why you need to know.

10. Interruptions

It's one of the hardest lessons parents teach children: Don't interrupt. Interrupting is desperately tempting for children because they haven't yet learned they can control emotions like impatience. So what's our excuse?

When we ask our clients to self-assess their own communication skills and shortcomings, the main shortcoming, by their own admission, is “I interrupt too much.”

Interruptions are inimical to good communication. Being interrupted feels disrespectful. It conveys impatience and clearly says, “What I have to say is more important than what you are saying.” It catches the speaker off guard and makes him forget the point he was making. If it happens more than once, it's maddening, and he might never recover his train of thought. The start/stop effect on the conversation becomes a parody of a productive conversation.

Starting the interruption with, “I’m sorry, but” erases none of the injury. The damage is done, the quality of the interchange has been eroded, and it’s virtually impossible to get it back on track. Reps will tell us, “Sometimes we HAVE to interrupt, or we can’t help the person.” Sometimes what’s more effective than interrupting is a more subtle technique—total silence. Even the most upset caller will pause to make sure someone is still on the other end. The rep needs to be prepared for the pause with words of assent. “Yes, thank you, I understand you....”

But yes, sometimes on rare occasions, an interruption is the only possible route. Even then, it is important to do it without raising the temperature of the call. Never is tone more important than when you have to interrupt. Not with a stern “Excuse me!” Not with a hectoring “Hello-oh!” But with a calm, warm voice, positive words, and a tone of discovery: “Ah, what you just said was so important—may I interrupt you?”

Summary

The main thing about these ten arts and skills? It bears repeating: Yes, they can all be taught. We have taught them across all kinds of societies—from the highly privileged to the poorest, from highly educated to recently literate—and in technology companies and social service companies. Remember, at heart, what we are teaching is how to convey authentic emotion in appropriate ways, human to human. It is unfortunate that it went missing when call centers were making great gains on other fronts. But restoring communication arts and skills will have the same “happily ever after” effect of finding the missing slipper.

The hard work happens in the call center, but its payoff shows up in the hearts and minds of customers. And let’s face it, there are not many things businesses can do to truly influence customer hearts and minds in any lasting way. Customers are fickle, loyalty is elusive, and trust is fleeting. But making that genuine, emotional connection has staying power.

We have a client who put in the hard miles to get this just right. It was their last-ditch attempt to lift their customer satisfaction scores, which lagged their peers’ dismally and had resisted other initiatives. As you can imagine, it was not a happy environment when we started. But the leaders were so committed that they made a huge alteration in their performance assessments, weighting communication arts and skills at 50% of the score. It was impossible for a rep to succeed, in other words, without demonstrating top-notch communication arts and skills.

It didn’t happen overnight. They hadn’t ended up in the customer sat cellar overnight, so they had a lot to change—a whole culture. These concepts (emotions! etiquette!) were not just unpracticed, they were considered a bit weird at first—out of place in a busy business. It took lots of concentration, coaching, and modeling by managers. It was intense.

“Being interrupted feels disrespectful. It conveys impatience and clearly says, ‘What I have to say is more important than what you are saying.’”

“Customers had noticed. Customers had voted. Communication arts and skills had won.”

But a year later, they looked up from their hard work and saw that they had soared past all their peers to the top of the customer satisfaction ranks! After their single-minded focus on connecting with customers, the connection couldn't have been a clearer. Customers had noticed. Customers had voted. Communication arts and skills had won. You should see and hear that happy environment now—and you should ask those reps which environment they now prefer!



Edward G. Brown is President, Co-Chairman, and co-founder of Cohen Brown Management Group, the leading sales and service culture change specialist for the financial services industry. The company's clients, many of the largest financial institutions on six continents, regularly report breakthrough results in revenue, cross-sales, customer service, and employee satisfaction. He created the company's call center solution—a rich integration of classroom instruction, video, and real-world online experience for superior performance in all aspects of call center agent-customer interaction. He is the author of two books on management. Before founding Cohen Brown, he was a management consultant to Fortune 500 and other companies. He is currently focused on a program called *Structured Time and Workflow Management* and his book called *Time Surplus Machine: How to Find the Time You Never Knew You Had*. Ed_Brown@cbmg.com, (310) 966-1001.



When **Johanna Lubahn** managed National Australia Bank's Call Center operations, sales results increased 400 percent. At the same time, employee satisfaction rose and staff attrition fell at significant rates. She was director of Michigan National Bank's call center when it achieved the "50 percent of retail sales at one-quarter of the cost," using Cohen Brown training programs, consulting, methodologies, and tools. As Cohen Brown's Managing Director for Call Center Services, she works with call centers around the world including some world-standard centers. Contact details are Johanna_Lubahn@cbmg.com, (517) 349-4066.
