



UNIT-4

Call Handling Skills

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand the importance of a professional telephone manner
- ✓ Confidently handle calls even during busy times
- ✓ Take calls for reservations and collect all important guest information

Unit 4

Call Handling Skills

Making and receiving telephone calls is essential part of the hotel receptionist's role. In fact, you may spend much of your working day on the phone. Nevertheless, whether you take 10, 50 or 150 calls in a single afternoon, you need to treat every guest and enquiry with the same respect.

It's often said that every call should be constructed like a story - an interaction with a beginning, a middle and an end. Your job being to ensure that each of these stories has a suitably happy ending!

Greeting the Caller

A few basic rules when greeting a caller:

Rule 1 – Do not make it too informal

When answering the phone, you can never guarantee who may be calling - even if you have caller ID setup. Because of this, it's important to make sure your greeting is friendly but formal. For example, using 'Hello' instead of 'Hi' and ensuring you speak in a clear and professional tone. More often than not, your hotel's policy will be to greet the caller with "Good morning/afternoon/evening", in accordance with the time of day.

Rule 2 – Always give your name and that of your hotel

After which, you need to let them know who they are talking to and which establishment they have reached. It shouldn't be up to the guest to *ask* whether or not they've reached the reception of the hotel they intended to call - you should make it clear. "Good afternoon and thanks for calling the Estate Inn, you're speaking to James on reception, how can I help?" This being an ideal formula to work with.

Rule 3 – Take a deep breath

There will be plenty of times when you are rushed off your feet and are quite exhausted. Nevertheless, you must never answer the phone in a manner that gives the impression you are struggling, overworked and out of breath. During busy times, it pays to stop for a second, take a deep breath and compose yourself. In addition, smiling while on the telephone can trick your brain into making you sound more positive and happy than you actually are! It may feel a little strange at first, but can nonetheless be surprisingly effective - give it a try and see for yourself.

Onto the middle of the conversation...

You've asked the customer what you can do to help, so you'll now be told what they need. Some callers will want to know specific details of your hotel (like its address and directions), some may be calling to make bookings and others may wish to confirm the details of existing bookings. There will also be those who simply need to be put through to another department, or have questions regarding past stays and payments.

In all instances, the better you know the hotel you work for, the easier it becomes to provide the information the customer requests. In any instance where you do not have an immediate answer to their question, you can either *ask* if it's ok to put them on hold while you check, or offer to call them back. The important note here being to always ask before you put a customer on hold - some would much rather hang up and wait for a call-back.

As for transferring calls to different desks and departments, there are two primary types of transfers - blind transfers and introduced transfers.

Blind Transfer

As the name suggests, a 'blind' transfer happens when a caller is transferred directly to another desk or extension, without first being introduced by the person transferring the call. As above, it is essential that you first tell the caller that you intend to transfer them, before doing so. Simply say "No problem I'll transfer you through to the XXXX department (or the desk of XXXX) right now, please hold the line." Most routine queries that need to be transferred to other departments need not necessarily be introduced.

When you make a blind transfer, there are three possible outcomes. The call will be answered by the person or department it was transferred to, the call will reach a voicemail box, or the call will 'bounce' back to you. If the call reverts back to you, it then becomes your responsibility to take a message from the caller and ensure their inquiry is dealt with. Even if it's got nothing to do with your department, you still need to take a detailed message. This will include their name, their telephone number, the reason for their call, who needs to get back to them and a suitable time to get in touch.

It's not uncommon to receive calls from individuals who have attempted to reach a certain desk or person several times, only to have failed in every attempt. Understandably, they may have become frustrated with the whole thing...and might well take out their frustrations on you. Hotels only run smoothly when all departments work seamlessly together. Hence, even if the request or issue doesn't fall within your normal responsibilities, it's still important to take ownership of it in the meantime.

Put yourself in the position of the caller and think about how you would like the issue to be handled. Rather than simply saying “Sorry, please try calling again later”, you could say something along the lines of “Let me look into the matter for you, I’ll get in touch with you personally by the end of the day to let you know what’s happening.” Alternatively, you could refer the matter to your line manager, if the caller has become particularly frustrated with the way their query has been handled.

Key Note:

Always ensure that call back requests are followed up! If you cannot do this yourself, ask someone else to do it as a priority on your behalf.

Introduced Transfers

The second type of transfer is an introduced transfer, which is when you speak to the person you are transferring the caller to and let them know who is calling. In this case, you will always need to establish who it is that’s calling and the reason for their call - i.e. asking for their name and the nature of their inquiry.

In some instances, you may find callers reluctant to offer a reason for their call. Don’t take offense - it could be a personal matter they cannot discuss with you. Simply ask “Can I ask who’s calling please?” followed by “...and can I ask what the call is regarding?” and most callers will happily oblige. The problem being that in some instances when callers refuse to indicate the reason for their call, they end up being transferred to entirely the wrong departments and desks.

When introducing a transferred call, provide the recipient with as much information as possible. This should include the name of the caller, the purpose of their call and anything else of relevance - such as whether the caller sounds angry or frustrated at the time.

Recording Calls for Reference

Some hotels (and businesses in general) automatically record and store phone calls for future reference. Even if this isn’t the case, it can be useful to request that at least a handful of phone calls are recorded while training as a receptionist. Listening back, you’ll get a much clearer idea of how you handled each call and customer.

When listening back to previous conversations, it’s worth taking note of the following:

- Your tone of voice throughout the conversation
- The pace of the conversation (relaxed, rushed etc.)
- Whether the customer sounded satisfied with the exchange
- If the required information was provided in a timely manner
- Any aspects of the call that could be improved
- Gaps in your knowledge of the hotel and its services

Key Note:

Be sure to listen intently when a caller provides their name and their reason for calling. It can be very frustrating to be asked to repeat information you have already provided. This is where a pen and paper (or notepad application on your computer) can come in handy - always make a note of important information.

Reservation Enquiries

Every hotel has its own unique policy regarding reservations made by telephone. Nevertheless, the vast majority of telephone reservation enquiries will play out as follows:

1. When the caller has indicated they wish to make a reservation, ask them for the dates they would like to stay and the type of room they need.
"No problem, can you confirm the dates you'd like to stay with us and the type of room you'd like to book?"
2. Unless the caller has already stated the number of guests, it's also important to check how many people will be staying.
"Ok, and how many guests will be staying in the room?"
3. After checking availability, you'll be able to provide the guest with one of two answers to their reservation query:
 - a. *"I'm sorry but we don't have any availability for those dates at the moment. Would you like me to check any alternative dates or room types?"*
 - b. *"Yes we're showing availability for those nights, the rate will be £XX per night on a room only/bed and breakfast basis. Would you like me to go ahead with the booking?"*
4. At this point, the guest will either indicate that they wish to go ahead with the booking, or are not interested in booking at this time. It's also possible that they may question or criticise the price quoted, and perhaps ask if you can offer them a room at a lower rate.

A Note on Negotiations

The extent to which you are authorised (or not authorised) to negotiate on price will be established by the hotel your work for and your line manager. In all instances, however, it will be necessary to use your judgement to ensure discounted rates are not offered excessively or unnecessarily. If demand is high and you could easily sell a one-night stay for £175, there's no sense reducing the price to £80 for the sake of one irate customer. If you're not authorised to negotiate or you find yourself dealing with a particularly unhappy caller, speak to your line manager for support.

Confirmation

If the caller goes ahead and makes the booking, enter their reservation into the system in accordance with your hotel's policies. After which, it's essential that you confirm every important detail with the guest and ensure the information in the system is correct:

"Ok so to confirm, that's a double room for two guests, arriving on October 21st for a three-night stay on a bed and breakfast basis, for a total price of £240. Is that correct?"

Key Note:

After confirming the reservation details with the guest, provide them with a confirmation number and inform them that they will receive an e-mail with complete details of their booking. In addition, be sure to clearly communicate any pre-payment policies - especially when hotel policy does not allow refunds for reservations cancelled after payment had been

Ending the call

Try to leave a positive impression with every caller, ending each call with a standardised but friendly and personable sign-off. Something along the lines of:

"Is there anything else I can help you with today? Thank you for calling the Estate Inn and we're looking forward to seeing you on October 21st, goodbye!"

If it's a more general call or the customer chose not to go ahead and make the booking, you can end the call with a more general statement such as:

"Thanks for calling the Estate Inn, please get in touch anytime if there's anything you need or if you have any other questions, goodbye!"

Of course, injecting at least a *little* personality into the equation is important. You don't want to sound as if you are reading scripted lines from a textbook, or come across as robotic and disinterested. Tailor your responses (and your general conversation) in accordance with requirements. Things may get a little awkward from time to time as a new hotel receptionist, but practice makes perfect.

Key Note:

It is important to provide the same service over the telephone as you would when dealing with someone face to face. You cannot put someone 'on hold' when they are in front of you, therefore avoid placing callers on hold unless absolutely necessary (i.e. to check with a colleague). When you do put someone on hold, never do so for more than 30 seconds without going back to the caller confirm that you are still looking into the situation. To demonstrate how long 30 seconds is, look at a clock or watch in silence and see how long 30 seconds actually is. Now, imagine what it would be like if you had been put on hold for this amount of time!

Further Reading:

- ✓ *John P. Wilson, (2009), The Call Centre Training Handbook.*