

CONTACT HANDLING

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1. GENERAL

1.01 This section describes standards for handling contacts between customers and Plant Service Center employees receiving trouble reports.

1.02 This section has been reissued to:

- (a) Eliminate the "question form" of offering repair appointments and introduce a strategy for negotiating appointments. This change is intended to permit the Plant Service Center customer contact employee to control the negotiated appointment time and, consequently, control the repair work load.
- (b) Emphasize the importance of recognizing customer comments.
- (c) Emphasize the importance of negotiating only those appointments that can be met.
- (d) Change several contact handling strategies.
- (e) Consolidate contact handling information.

Since this is a general revision, arrows ordinarily used to indicate changes have been omitted.

1.03 This section is in agreement with accepted contact handling standards stressed in Plant Training Course 211. The criteria for evaluating contact handling performance are defined in the Management Quality Control Plan for Repair Service Bureaus.

1.04 Additional material in connection with customers reporting trouble with their telephone service is covered in other Bell System Practices on CTRAP, and on Appointments.

1.05 Most customer contacts with the Plant Service Center are by telephone. It is important for us to recognize that, to customers, we are the Telephone Company. The manner and efficiency with which these contacts are handled is important in molding the customer's view of our Company.

1.06 Although customers are always inconvenienced by having to report trouble, they may be tolerant of storm damage or an infrequent trouble. But, they certainly are irritated or annoyed if they have frequent troubles or have to call more than once about a trouble, particularly if they think we missed an appointment. Frequently a disgruntled customer's viewpoint can be greatly improved by friendly, courteous, and efficient contact handling.

1.07 All customer contacts must be handled in a pleasant, friendly, and businesslike manner. Courtesy, interest, helpfulness, clear speech, and good expression are always essential. They must be learned and practiced, if we are to have contacts that will favorably impress the customer.

2. A GOOD CONTACT

2.01 The ingredients of every good customer contact are the same. Components of a good contact are described in the following paragraphs.

2.02 *A Prompt Answer:* Remember, to wait more than ten seconds often seems long when you are in a hurry or annoyed. A prompt answer is the customer's first impression. It proves we're "on our toes" and tells the customer that we consider his call very important.

2.03 *A Smooth Connection to the Line:* The interval when the customer is connected to the open

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line should be free of unnecessary noise, such as may be created by jiggling the switchhook or putting on a headset.

2.04 An Appropriate Greeting: "Telephone Repair Service" is the minimum greeting that can be used when answering a call. However, greetings such as "Good morning. Telephone Repair Service, Miss Smith" or "Telephone Repair Service, may I help you?" are also acceptable.

2.05 Getting Information: Pertinent information must be obtained from every contact to permit satisfactory handling of the trouble. A customer may furnish information in a rapid, almost unbroken manner. Trouble ticket entries should be kept current with his delivery—see Bell System Practices on Customer Trouble Report Analysis Plan (CTRAP) for trouble ticket entry requirements. If the customer's speech is clear but we ask him to repeat for us, he may feel that we are inattentive or inexperienced. Simple verification statements are necessary at times, but they must always be courteous, intelligible, and reasonable from the customer's viewpoint. Some customers require encouragement to tell us what we need to know, but questions should never be curt or indicate impatience. Information obtained should include:

- (a) Customer's name, address, and all telephone numbers (calling and called) involved in the trouble being reported.
- (b) Complete trouble report details necessary to permit smooth, efficient correction of the trouble condition.
- (c) Complete details of the customer's comments relating to unsatisfactory work or plant conditions and/or dissatisfaction with an appointment. Where the first offered appointment is unacceptable and negotiations (see Part 3, Negotiating Appointments) are carried through one or more steps terminating with the customer's acceptance, no appointment comment details are required. But, where these subsequent negotiating steps fail to yield an acceptable appointment—that is to say, the customer will not accept the "high-priority" (earliest possible) appointment—it is extremely important that employees recognize this fact and record comprehensive details of adverse reaction. This information is the repair system's "first line of defense" in correcting problems before they adversely affect service results and customer attitude.

(d) Confirmation of appointment, trouble report, and access information should be accomplished through a brief summary of significant details. In certain cases such as, unattended service locations and some out-of-service troubles, this confirmation should include another telephone number where the customer may be reached.

(e) Where the line card is pulled while the customer is on the line (or the customer record is available from a computer-based records system) and certain data is verified, *confidential information should never be given to the customer*. Verification must be achieved through questioning the customer for name and address, etc. When our record does not agree with information furnished, the fact and details should be recorded and differences reconciled later.

2.06 Giving Information: Customers' questions should be answered promptly and courteously with the exception of requests for confidential information, such as nonpublished service listing information. When the latter case occurs, we should explain our reason for withholding that information.

2.07 A Definite Appointment: Appointments must be made in such a way that the customer cannot fail to understand that we intend to clear his trouble by the specific time stated. Appointments should be stated by clock hour and day.

2.08 Access Information: When customers are reporting trouble, we do not always know whether a visit will be necessary. We should be prepared on our first contact with them to obtain whatever information we need about access. Sometimes customers will volunteer such information and we may adjust appointments to fit their needs. Other customers, such as business, may be known to be accessible within limitations. If the customer isn't specific, or if we don't know the access limitations, we can ask the question, "Will someone be there until (Appointment Time)?" In appropriate cases, we should add, "We may have to visit your home," etc.—There will be cases where we find it will not be necessary to have access to the customer's premises after we have made an appointment. Examples are where we test the trouble OK or clear it without a station visit. It is important and courteous to call the customer and tell him this. This will let him know that the trouble has been cleared and he will not be waiting for someone to visit his premises. Also, he will not be inconven-

enced by having to call us again to find out what we did about his report.

2.09 A Pleasing and Helpful Manner: The expressions used and the remarks made are parts of your telephone personality. Use a pleasant, natural tone of voice. Ingredients that make a telephone conversation a good one are interest, helpfulness, and clear speech.

2.10 Unusual Customer Requests: When the repair service employee has a customer on the line, every reasonable effort should be made to comply with the customer's request. Requests which cannot be complied with in normal operating procedures should be referred to a supervisor. Employees should never refuse to accept a trouble report.

Repair service employees will receive calls from customers and contractors requesting location of buried plant. These requests must be handled quickly and efficiently, and in accordance with existing procedures, to bring the request to the attention of appropriate Plant forces and to avoid possible damage to our facilities and customer service.

3. NEGOTIATING APPOINTMENTS

3.01 Customer contact employees should negotiate only those appointments that can be met by repair forces.

3.02 There are isolated emergency cases—i.e., PBX, Centrex or other major system failure—when it will be necessary to deviate from regular clearance procedures. Appointments of "Right away," "At once," or "Immediately" are warranted in these cases and must be kept within one hour. These deviations from regular clearance procedures will involve special measures, such as, diverting repair employees from jobs on which they are working to the emergency job, renegotiating appointments to avoid misses etc. It is expected that these emergency appointments will require supervisory involvement to execute the required shifting of repair personnel.

3.03 The above isolated emergency cases are exceptions, outside the scope of regular trouble clearance procedures. Within regular trouble clearance procedures, the customer should initially be offered an appointment based on the urgency indicated by the customer, the critical nature of the service, and the ability of the repair forces to restore the service—the customer may be offered a "low-priority," "normal," or "high-priority" appointment.

3.04 There will be instances where the customer will want an earlier appointment. The following paragraphs define a negotiating sequence to be followed by customer contact employees *when the customer does not agree to the initially offered appointment*—the initially offered appointment may be "low-priority," "normal," or "high-priority."

(1) Where the customer was initially offered an appointment and requests a *later time*, he should be given an appointment that meets his requirements.

(2) Where the customer was offered a "low-priority" appointment and requests an earlier time, the employee should proceed through the following sequence until customer agreement is secured:

(a) State the reason for not offering an earlier appointment—a reason may be: other customers have reported trouble where they can neither make nor receive calls.

(b) Offer the customer a "normal" appointment.

(3) Where the customer was offered a normal appointment and requests an earlier time, the employee should proceed through the following sequence until customer agreement is secured:

(a) Reassure the customer that the appointment will be met and state the reason for not offering an earlier appointment—a reason may be that all repair forces are already committed to previously appointed jobs.

(b) Advise the customer of the possible impact on pending repair commitments to other customers, if he is given an earlier appointment.

(c) Offer the customer a "high-priority" appointment.

(4) Where the customer was offered a "high-priority" appointment and requests an earlier time, the employee should proceed through the following sequence until customer agreement is secured:

(a) Reassure the customer that the appointment will be met.

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(b) Advise the customer that this is the shortest interval that can be given with confidence.

(c) When the customer still insists on an earlier appointment, he should be turned over to a supervisor who will complete negotiations.

3.05 Where emergency or abnormal conditions such as fire, hurricane, etc., make it impractical or impossible to shorten an appointment time, the appointment negotiation is impractical. Questioning should be limited to minimum required report details; the customer should be given an expected service restoral time and a satisfactory explanation of the abnormal condition.

3.06 Listed below are some examples of acceptable appointment offerings:

A customer reports at 9:00 a.m., "I can't break dial tone"—Typical Response: "We'll have that cleared for you by eleven this morning."

A customer reports at 10:00 a.m., "My line has had a hum on it for several days"—Typical Response: "I can have that cleared before 2 o'clock today."

A customer reports at 4:00 p.m., "My telephone is loose on the wall but not out of service"—Typical Response: "We will have that fixed before 5 p.m. tomorrow."

A PBX attendant reports at 3:00 P.M. that the spare headset is cutting out—Typical Response: "I can have a man fix that for you by 10:00 A.M. tomorrow morning."

A neighbor reports a customer's telephone—Typical Response: "I see, Sir. Do you know when Mr. Jones will be home?" An appropriate class of appointment should be offered and a number where Mr. Jones can be reached should be obtained, if possible.

A report of "light out" on a Princess telephone might be handled like this—Typical Response: "I can mail you a bulb with instructions on how to change it, if that will be all right." If the customer agrees—"I'll put that in the mail for you today."

A customer reports that her bell doesn't ring and that she's expecting a call regarding an accident in her family—Typical Response: "I understand, Mrs. Jones." A high-priority appointment should be offered.

A PBX attendant at a hotel reports no supervision on any extensions—Typical Response: "We'll send someone over immediately and have that repaired within the hour."

A customer reports his telephone dead at 10:00 a.m.—Typical Response: "The fire on Queen Street has burned off the cable serving your home, Mr. Jones. We have our men working on it and your telephone will be fixed by midnight tonight."

A customer reports at 11:00 a.m. that her bell doesn't ring—Typical Response: "The windstorm has blown electric wires down in your neighborhood, Miss Smith. The power company is clearing them now, and this will let our men repair your telephone. Your trouble will be cleared by seven this evening."

At 4:00 p.m. a customer reports wire down and can't call—Typical Response: "The road to your development is still blocked by the snow, Mr. Brown. I understand the Highway Department is plowing that road now, so we'll be able to repair your line by noon tomorrow."

3.07 Information relative to appointment categories, specific application of appointments, and handling of reports from customers served by another Plant Service Center is included in Section 660-104-300.

4. WHEN TO GIVE AN APPOINTMENT

4.01 All trouble reports call for an appointment that we firmly intend to keep, including major troubles such as cable failures or storms.

4.02 There are some cases where appointments can't be made or would seem out of place if an attempt were made to make them. These are typical conditions:

- (a) Customer hangs up before an appointment can be made.
- (b) Calls solely to add information to an earlier report.
- (c) Contacts that will be acted on by other departments.
- (d) Reports received and cleared with the customer still on the line.
- (e) Where it is certain that the customer can be reached, a phrase is used such as—"Can I call you right back, Mrs. Jones, to see if the trouble is still on your line?" or "Will you please hold, Mr. Jones, while we check to see if the trouble is still on your line?" On the recontact, an appointment should be made if trouble does exist.

4.03 There are some reports where the extent of remedial effort cannot be determined without a survey of the physical conditions—in these cases the appointment should be made for a date and time by which the required survey will be completed. After the survey is completed, a definite appointment must be made to remedy the condition, as appropriate.

5. CHANGING APPOINTMENTS

5.01 Occasionally a customer will ask to change an appointment previously given him. This should be done whenever possible. There may be times when the repair force wants to change appointments. They, of course, should make appointments they expect to keep. Promises of unrealistic, impossible-to-meet time periods will cause subsequent reports and critical comments. However, if something unexpected happens that prevents the repair force from keeping the appointment, the customer should be called, the problem explained, and a new appointment given that will suit the customer's needs.

6. SUBSEQUENT REPORTS

6.01 Sometimes a customer will make a second report on a pending trouble. He may say that

this is his second report, or it may already be known. On known subsequent reports, the original appointment should be restated if it can be readily obtained and if it can be met. If a later appointment must be given and the first one was missed, an apology should be made and the reason given. However, the customer may not mention that he is making a subsequent report unless he is given an appointment different from the one he got on the earlier call. In this case, an apology should be made for not recognizing the subsequent report, and it should be established if the original appointment is still valid. It may be necessary to leave the line briefly so that a status report of the trouble may be given to the customer, along with an appropriate appointment time.

7. COMPLETE CUSTOMER SERVICE

7.01 Plant Service Center people should be able to handle most calls to the customer's satisfaction. However, if they cannot answer some questions or make certain arrangements satisfactorily, other departments might be better equipped to handle these cases. The customer should be offered the choice of calling the other department or, if he is agreeable and accessible, we should arrange for the right department to call him.

7.02 When a customer requests verification of a busy, he should be referred to the operator. If he refuses he should be informed that the Plant Service Center does not make busy verification. Where an emergency exists, which involves life or property, the Plant Service Center may handle a request to interrupt a conversation in progress. In these emergencies the name of the interrupting party should be announced to the interrupted parties with the message from the interrupting party. Details of the occurrence should be recorded on an "excluded" trouble ticket.

7.03 Calls that are best handled by another department may be received in the Plant Service Center when the department concerned is closed. We should inform the customer when that department is open for business. If he indicates that this is unsatisfactory or his need is urgent, every effort should be made to assist him. These cases generally involve requests for connection or disconnection of service, disconnects in error, denied for nonpayment, installa-

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tion missed appointments, etc. These are unusual opportunities to convince a customer that your Company is "on its toes" and always ready to serve. Ask the customer to wait on the line, or make arrangements to call him back at a time and place that suits his convenience. Promptly refer the case to your, or another appropriate, supervisor and determine what action will be taken. Tell the customer—by call-back if necessary—what will be done. In certain cases, your Plant Service Center may have interdepartmental practices that will permit you to act directly without calling a supervisor.

8. REPORTS ON SPECIAL SERVICES

8.01 The maintenance of all services is of concern to the Plant Service Center. Of particular im-

portance are the "Special Services." We must recognize these services when they report trouble, so we can give appointments commensurate with the urgency of the situation and can arrange for special handling if it is required. Some special services use regular telephone numbers and consequently are not identified as "Special Service." The nature of the report or the name of the customer will sometimes tell us that it is a "Special Service"; at other times, the positive identification on the line card is needed.

9. SUMMARY

9.01 The customer contact employee in the Plant Service Center is the Telephone Company to the person at the other end of the line. The Company is judged by the voice that speaks for it over the telephone—by what is said and how it is said.