

Is That My Cell Phone or Yours?

By Anne M. Obarski

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I am slow to embrace technology! It takes me awhile to get my arms around gadgets and use them with any regularity. It took me some time to get to be best friends with my microwave, and I am still a little clumsy when using our video camera. My palm pilot is a back up to my desk calendar, instead of the other way around. And I made a new years resolution with my, almost 16 year old son, that I would keep my cell phone on when I am away from home. That has been the toughest resolution for me to keep, along with remembering my cell phone number!

I still don't like cell phones. They keep making them smaller and they just don't fit my face. There are times I feel I can't talk and listen at the same time because the phone doesn't reach from my lips to my ears! Then there is the itty-bitty keypad. No wonder people get into car accidents when they are trying to dial! What is more challenging is to try to dial it in the car, at night! With my manicured nails, it is a wonder I haven't dialed Zambia by mistake!

There is part of me that gets jealous when watching people use cell phones. First I think they are so popular that others can't wait to talk to them. Then I imagine all of those phone calls that are immediate business deals. The other person can't wait till they get to the office to seal the deal. I know a woman who would get onto a plane with a headset on, the kind with the mouthpiece that curls in front of your mouth, and just keep talking as she was walking down the aisle in the plane. I always wondered whom she had to talk to so badly.

That leads me to people who use cell phones in stores. If the customer walks into a store and is already on their "cell", how do you greet them? These customers definitely are "multi-tasking"! They can walk, talk, carry on a phone conversation, try on clothes and probably pay for them without missing a beat. But if you're an employee, how do you interact with them, when they are already glued to their "cell"?

Here are some pointers to deal with customers on their cell phones.

1. Don't try to compete with their conversation.

You are secondary in importance and it will only further confuse them if you try to ask them a question.

2. Try to make eye contact.

This will be tough when they are already mentally pre-occupied. As you are walking by them, smile and give them a little wave. This way you are helping them come back to reality. They have walked into your business for a reason.

3. Hang up please!

No one wants to listen to someone else's phone conversation. Did you ever notice how loud some people are on cell phones? It is annoying for other customers and for employees. To encourage them to hang up, without saying such, I would try to physically be working wherever they happen to be standing or browsing. Moving inventory, folding clothes, checking fitting rooms, talking to customers, anything to let them know they are in a place of business. I would even ask other employees questions right in the same vicinity. When they feel as though they are competing to hear, on those itty-bitty phones, they will probably opt for ending the call.

I believe cell phones have a place. I believe they are a necessary part of our daily lives. I also believe that some people lack common courtesy. How many times have you found yourself in a checkout line when the employee is on a personal call, or having a conversation with another employee and totally ignoring you? People don't need a piece of phone equipment to miss what is going on around them. I have recently had people in my audiences get phone calls. Sometimes I will say to the whole group, "I told them not to call me at work!" That usually makes the person receiving the call end it very quickly! After all, all eyes and ears are now focused on them, not where I want the attention to be!

Good communication is a physical give and take. Building relationships with clients is a physical give and take. When one party is pre-occupied it makes it much more difficult to nurture the relationship. Sometimes we don't realize we have tuned the other person out.

We need to be in the present. Excuse me, did you just hear what I just said? Oh, sorry, I didn't notice you were busy.

Anne M. Obarski is the "Eye on Retail Performance". She is an author, professional speaker, retail consultant and Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts. Anne works with companies who are performance, profit and people focused and helps leaders see their businesses through their customers' eyes. Anne's mystery shoppers have secretly "snooped" over 2000 stores searching for excellence in customer service. Reach Anne at www.merchandiseconcepts.com or <mailto:anne@merchandiseconcepts.com>

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