

The Importance of a Good Receptionist

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[Blog entry](#)

In the movie *Braveheart*, at the battle of Stirling, in the first impact with the powerful English army, the Scots used very long spears to defeat the English heavy horses.

Since the Scots, in spite of being outnumbered by the English 5 to 1, successfully annihilated the heavy horses, the English army was basically defeated on impact, and the rest of the battle was mere “formality”.

What that means in business is that you have to create a powerful point of impact with your prospects, although, unlike the Scots in the movie, you may not want to kill them.

Nevertheless this impact will define the fate of your relationship with the outside world.

This first in-person encounter with your company sets the tone of all future interactions.

It helps the outside world to make a decision as to whether or not to do business with your company and whether to treat it as a premium-priced respected authority or a budget-priced fungible vendor.

When we look at a business from the outside, we have a perception of it.

For instance, most people perceive Walmart as a modern day sweat shop that pays the CEO an annual salary of \$35 million, but keeps its work force in raging poverty by paying them the legal minimum wage.

I’ve read somewhere that 72% of Walmart workers are on various government-run income assistance programmes because they couldn’t survive on their paycheques alone.

By contrast, look at Costco, the second-largest retailer in the U.S. after Walmart.

Even during the economic downturn, Costco paid its hourly workers an average of \$20.89 an hour. Plus add to that the bonuses and the extended medical plan.

Oh, and President and CEO W. Craig Jelinek gets paid “only” \$5.5 million a year.

The outside perception is created by the inside reality of what’s going on inside the company and what’s getting “acted out” to the outside world.

Costco has virtually zero attrition, while Walmart’s work force changes faster than executives change their socks.

Anyway...

Between the outside perception and the inside reality, there is a small but significant yet grossly neglected interface area: The reception desk and the company receptionist(s).

Most IT companies look at receptionists as cheap errand gals, well, sometimes boys, who can make coffee and perform various menial tasks that “real professionals” regard as activities beneath them.

Many business owners believe that receptionists are just pretty girls who answer phones.

As long as they sound nice on the phone, they don’t have to be smart and knowledgeable in anything, so legal minimum wage is just fine for them.

As a result, receptionists are of the lowest rank in most IT companies, and get paid as little as

humanly possible.

And as an added “bonus”, most people in the company wipe their shoes in them and abdicate their dirty work to them.

Disclaimer: In this article I cover the ins and outs of recruiting a receptionist for the service delivery/business development sections of an IT company.

General calls and enquiries from suppliers, job applicants and others go to the company’s general reception.

After the first contact, interested prospects receive a non-listed phone number that is different from the main reception’s number, and from then on, they deal with the company’s service delivery/business development section, including a tech- and business-savvy receptionist.

But first let’s see...

Where The Great Receptionist Problem Is

Well, the basic premise is that most receptionists are pretty frustrated and are pretty eager to change jobs and/or employers.

But now comes the real problem...

Imagine that, responding to some marketing initiatives, someone calls your company to enquire about some products/services.

And who is going to answer that phone call?

It’s the frustrated receptionist who hates everything about her employer, her boss and her job.

The buyer and the receptionists may spend two minutes on the phone before the buyer says goodbye, writes off the company as a loser and calls the competition.

And can you guess how many companies track this kind of business loss?

Only a very, very few.

The notion is that gains and losses are in the company’s accounting system, and whatever is happening outside the books is not important.

But when you consider the lifetime value of the average client and multiply that by the number of lost enquiries on a daily basis, you may get pretty shocked.

Key Traits of Great Receptionists

This is not a general trait list of general receptionists. This is for receptionists who are manning the service delivery/business development main desk at premium-calibre entrepreneurial type IT companies, while others are doing their daily project and business development work.

Specific

Whenever she can be she should be specific.

When a prospect/clients comes to the office for an appointment, most receptionists say, “Mr. Cringingnuts will be with you shortly.”

Well, what is shortly?

When you’re taken to A&E (Accident & Emergency), you get a very unique meaning of the word shortly.

Make sure you get Mr. Cringingnuts’ availability, and tell his visitor, “Mr. Cringingnuts will be with you in six minutes.”

Now the visitor can prepare for the waiting time. Not to mention that your specificity impresses the living daylights out of the visitor.

Let’s remember that in a world of uncertainty, precision is very impressive.

And since IT is a very precise science, you might as well make precision a watchword throughout your company.

A Premium Person

Imagine that a call comes in and the receptionist takes the call. It’s from a buyer enquiring about your company’s products and services.

If your receptionist is a premium person who buys quality things as a consumer, she automatically speaks “premium language” with that buyer. If the caller is a premium buyer, there is an instant match of life philosophies, and there is a good chance the buyer goes to the next level.

But if it’s a bargain buyer, he gets shocked by the receptionist’s premium talk and he runs away very fast and very far.

And that’s great. After all, you want to have only premium buyers.

So, when you are interviewing your receptionist candidates, gently find out what’s important to them in life.

People buy the way they sell.

“Imagine that you are a price buyer and price is the top criteria in making your buying decision. All of the other aspects of the offering pale in importance. Now let’s assume that you take a job in sales. When you talk to prospective buyers, what criteria do you expect them to use in making their buying decisions? Price! The same as you do.” ~ Dale Furtwengler: Pricing for Profit: How to Command Higher Prices for Your Products and Services.

Engaging Phone Voice

One part of the phone voice is the scripts receptionists use and the other part of it is the tone.

By script I mean some skeleton with some tried-and-tested words and phrases on which receptionist can put substance in her own unique style.

For instance, the script specifies that we're having beef, rice and salad for lunch, but it's up to the chef how she prepares them for the final meal.

And now the shocking part...

I've read on an HR website that good receptionists can sound honest and engaging on the phone, while rolling their eyes and mentally cursing the caller.

Do you really want such a person in your company?

Not at the reception desk but anywhere in your company?

I wouldn't want such a person within a 1,000-mile radius around my business.

Project Management

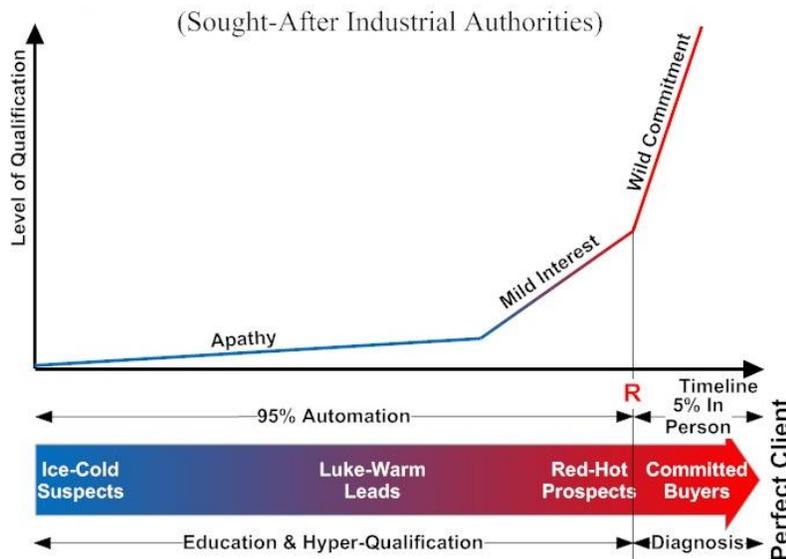
Your receptionist has to have a pretty good understanding of your project management process, so she can inform the appropriate people about where their projects stand.

New Client Onboarding

Your receptionist has to be intimately familiar with your company's "from first contact to signed contract" process. This is vital because she is a major player in client onboarding.

The idea is that until and unless buyers reach a certain commitment level to doing business with you, they can't have access to your subject matter experts.

Those people work on projects, and they can't be pulled away from deadline work for the sake of meeting mildly interested prospects.



Onboarding is based on the idea that buyers buy whenever they decide to buy, and if sellers try to force them to buy, they scare them away.

You invest your resources in in-person diagnostics, not presentations, if and only if there is a 99% chance that the prospect becomes a client.

The synergy of education and automated disqualification qualify buyers even before in-person time and effort are

invested.

Education is also a pre-selling process. It's the equivalent of the warm-up section of a workout in the gym. Without that warm-up, you can cause some serious damage to your muscles. In this

case, the damage is done to the relationship with the buyer.

If you neglect to educate your buyers correctly, then they are likely to make buying decisions based on the wrong buying criteria. Buying criteria that may be beneficial to your competitors detrimental to you. But correct buyer education...

- Eliminates price objections by using “apples to oranges” comparisons.
- Positions you as a recognised expert, while your competitors are regarded as desperate vendors.
- Puts you into a “category of one”, and in doing so makes your competitors irrelevant.

And at point “**R**”, the buyer qualifies for the first in-person meeting with a subject matter expert.

Business Skills

I believe good receptionists should be able to engage buyers in meaningful conversations. It means they should be able to start diagnosing buyers’ situations. It shouldn’t be hard-core interrogation but gently showing interest beyond surface level.

She should be able to engage the caller in talking about high-level business issues not subject matter issues.

Vendors talk about subject matter issues...

Buyer: “Hi, we need an estimate for a new website.”

Receptionist: “How many pages do you want? What colours do you want? Do you want it in Wordpress, Drupal or Joomla? Do you want Flash with it?”

This is idiotic and positions your company as a fungible vendor and your people a bunch of code and pixel pushers.

But respected authorities talk about business issues...

Buyer: “Hi, we need an estimate for a new website.”

Receptionist: “What is your company’s underlying strategic goal that justifies this initiative? In what way is the current website unable to serve this goal?”

Do you see the difference? The first receptionist is an order taker. The second one is a diagnostician.

Then the receptionists can open a record in the company’s CRM system about the caller and his company and enter all the relevant information that other people, who will interact with this buyer, will find useful and can use as a starting point for the project.

Subject Matter Skills

Receptionists should have a high-level understanding of the subject matter their companies operate in.

For instance, if your company works in the healthcare sector, all your people should have valid first and CRP certifications.

It's not only a huge differentiating factor from the competition but it's also a huge credibility-builder. And all it costs you is about \$200 per person per year.

If your subject matter is IT, have a geeky receptionist who understands bits, bytes and other terms that are common in your industry.

A Mild Extrovert

The word "mild" can be pretty broad, so let's take a quick look. Here is a little comparison is adapted from Nancy Ancowitz's book, *Self-Promotion for Introverts: The Quiet Guide to Getting Ahead*.

Introverts	Extroverts
Get energy from within	Get energy from others
Tend to energise and inspire others	Tend to de-energise and discourage others
Think before speaking or acting	Think out loud
Tend to be collegial and cooperative	Tend to be competitive
Listen a lot and talk a little, but with substance	Listen a little and talk a lot, but with little substance
Full of self-doubt	Full of self-righteousness
Substance over style	Style over substance
Speak more softly	Speak faster and louder
Prefer to do things themselves	Prefer to get things done by others and take the credit
In team work, they tend to share credit for success and blame themselves for mistakes	In team work, they tend to take credit for success and blame others for mistakes
Are more inclined to make deep conversations	Are more inclined to make empty chitchat
Prefer to stay in the "shadows" in support roles.	Prefer to stay in spotlight in leading roles ¹

¹ The more useless and incompetent they are, the more aggressively and desperately they hang on to their power.

Introverts	Extroverts
Prefer to speak with one or two people at a time	Prefer to be the centre of larger groups
Wait to be approached in social situations	Initiate conversations in social situations
Are typically reserved	Are typically active and expressive
Prefer to work alone or in very small groups	Prefer to work in larger groups
Know a lot about a few topics	Know a little about a lot of topics
Are more reflective and calm	Are more energetic
Are more detail oriented	Are more superficial
Need more personal space	Need to be in others' personal space
Are more private and reserved	Are more readily open
Have a few deep interests	Have many superficial interests
Good at offering favours, but bad at asking for them	Good at asking for favours, but bad at offering them

This list is based on very introverts and very extroverts. Most people are in between.

There's also a significant overlap. There are lots of detail-oriented extroverts and power-hungry introverts.

A good receptionist should be a healthy blend of both introvert and extrovert and be able to move on the scale either a bit to the left or the right as the caller's style requires it. But she shouldn't be a complete chameleon. Actually, you'd better stay away from chameleon type people in any position.

Leave them for the car and insurance industries.

But remember, she is the first contact with your company, so her communication style has to be pretty similar to the whole company's.

Mild OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder)

As long as it's mild, it's good. People with mild OCD are detail-oriented, love order around them, keep their environments tidy. And since being a receptionist is a position with regularly recurring tasks, mild OCD people score in this area too.

Receptionist Nightmares

I've read on a career website for receptionists that one key skill for a receptionist is the ability to lie without blinking an eye. According to the author, this is how a receptionist can control the whole organisation and becomes an irreplaceable staff member.

Another character trait the article advocates is the ability to play dumb. According to the author, an HR "professional", when a secretary plays dumb, lying comes very easy as the next step to get what she wants.

And what does she want?

Well, according to the expert, to get rid of the caller as quickly as humanly possible, so she can continue filing her nails, reading the latest celeb gossips or texting some friends.

Recruiting Receptionists

I don't want to go into the full details, including logistics, of recruiting receptionists, but I'd like to leave you with some questions that have served me well over the years.

While I'm not an HR expert, I've been helping clients to recruit receptionists to their service delivery/business development teams, which is a separate job from the main receptionist.

After the first contact with the company's main reception, interested prospects receive a non-listed phone number that is different from the main reception's number, and from then on, they deal with the company's service delivery/business development section, including a tech- and business-savvy receptionist who is really a coordinator for all service delivery and business development activities.

Considering the importance of the receptionist, all the service delivery and business development people should be involved in the interviewing process. Some directly, some indirectly.

They have to decide whether or not they can and want to work with this person.

Besides the standard questions, here are some questions that can be useful...

To the interviewer...

1. Would I feel good if I had a phone conversation with this person about a problem my company tries to solve?
2. Would I do business with person if she were the owner of this company? If not, then keep looking.
3. Would I invite this person and her spouse to my home for Sunday lunch?
4. Would I be happy if my children sought employment in this company?

To the interviewee...

5. What are some of the trade/professional journals, books, educational programmes or conferences that you've read, completed or attended recently?
6. Who are two key people in your field?

7. In what learning materials have you invested your own money lately that would advance your expertise and improve the quality of your work?

And last but not least, we have to talk about...

Compensating Receptionists

The danger of underpaying receptionists is that they feel ripped off, get demotivated and they perform way under their potential.

But this is the smaller problem.

The real problem is that they act out their poverty consciousness on prospective and existing clients. They feel pity for clients, and now their greedy bosses want to charge them an arm and a leg for some products/services.

So, subconsciously, cheap receptionists repel your premium clients.

Why? It's simple.

As human beings, we can't separate our work lives and home lives. Low-paid people are constantly preoccupied about their financial problems. They act that out their problems and neediness on prospects and clients. And that's not exactly attractive. Actually, it's pretty repelling.

So, how to pay receptionists?

Well, bloody well. The company's bottom line depends on them.

I've written in other articles that I believe in paying people the same.

I know, I know, so let me explain.

Let's assume that we are working for a worthwhile a cause with a noble purpose, not merely managing a business.

Let's further assume that we have a cohesive team of collaborative professionals, not a bunch of individualistic and competitive prima donnas.

Let's also assume that we expect team members to give 100% of their best and brightest to the cause because everyone's contribution matters.

Some of your techies may get pissed off that the receptionist gets paid the same as them, but then ask them to land their own clients if they want to eat.

Most of them couldn't do it.

Good receptionists can land new business.

What is that worth?

The reality is that delivering a service is the commodity. The ability to get new clients is the real expertise.

I've heard many clients say they split money between business development folks and implementers in 1:3.

25% for the business development folks and 75% got the implementers.

Is that fair?

If you employ only implementers, without the ability to acquire new clients, you're on a highway to commercial hell.

But if you employ only business developers, without the in-house ability to do the work, you can always subcontract out the implementation and make good money.

Yet, you can find plenty of IT companies with preponderance of implementing capabilities and very little capability of landing new clients.

That's why they have the notorious feast and famine nightmare.

Anyway, back to the pay.

I pay everyone the same base and the same bonus based on a fixed percentage of firm-wide revenue.

No, you may say, this is a rather communistic approach, and it may well be.

But these people are world-class team workers. And none of them is backstabbing the others because some people get paid undeservedly too much.

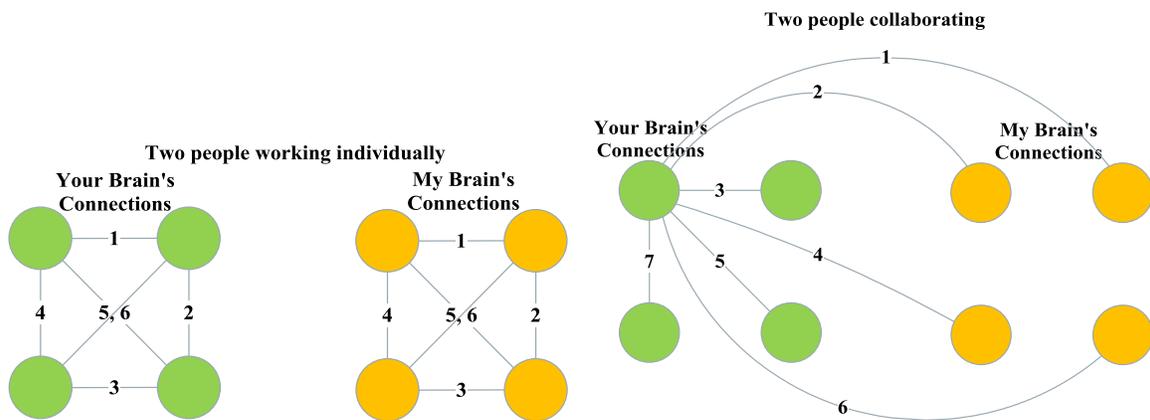
And here you have to understand something behind teamwork.

Our effectiveness and creativity are the function of the connections between brain cells.

Let's say two people are working on the problem. Let's say they have four brain cells each.

Working in isolation, I can have six connections and you can have six. That's **12** connection total.

But if we work in collaboration, we can have a total of **28** cell connections.



That makes the collaborating team (28/12) **2.33**-times (133%) more effective than the two individuals.

And this 133% performance increase justifies to pay a great receptionist \$100,000 or more.

Actually everyone makes more money in this equation, but some ego-driven idiots rather earn less and maintain their notion that they are worth more than a receptionist.

As you can also see, this 133% performance increase compensates for the fact that you're highly unlikely to staff your shop with geniuses.

Yet, you can out-perform and out-earn your competitors that hire geniuses but run highly competitive, borderline cut-throat work groups and pay competitive salaries.

And let's remember that minimum wage usually attracts people with skills and personalities at sub-minimum level or even below.

If you want to run an industry-leader of a company, then pay your people accordingly, and pay them 25-35% higher than the industry average for that position.

Think of Pareto's 80/20 rule.

20% of your people create 80% of value.

In a 100-person company that makes \$100 annual revenue, 20 people produce \$80 (\$4 per person) and 80 people produce \$20 (\$0.25 per person).

Producers outperform slackers 16-fold.

And to get this level of performance, you have to pay only 25-35% more.

It looks like a great bargain to me.

Summary

Just as a keynote speaker at a conference sets the key tone of the whole event, the receptionist is the proverbial keynote speaker for your company when it comes to interactions with the outside world.

And whether this person is someone on minimum wage with brawn or on maximum wage with brain, it's entirely up to you.

As the saying goes, \$10 people run \$10 businesses, employing other \$10 people, selling \$10 products/services.

The Million Dollar Consultant, Alan Weiss summarises the situation this way...

"Language controls discussion, discussion controls relationships, and relationships control business."

I believe this phrase should be a major guiding principle for every company that makes its money by serving people.

What do you think?

In the meantime, don't sell harder. Market smarter and your business will be better off for it.

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