



This month:  
**COMMUNI-  
CATION  
SKILLS**

The manager's companion to *The Customer Communicator*

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## Teach your reps to make use of the "Power of Pause"

**A simple pause for time, reflection, information, or simply to build rapport can make a big difference in providing effective customer service.**

"A stitch in time saves nine," the old adage goes, and that is essentially the message that author Nance Guilmartin delivers in her new book, *The Power of Pause: How to Be More Effective in a Demanding, 24/7 World*. Take the time to pause now — to reenergize or reorient yourself, consider your options, understand more clearly where the customer is coming from, and empathize with that customer. You will then save the trouble of confrontations, escalated calls, misunderstandings, and callbacks later in the customer service process.

"Managers and reps should understand," she says, "that in the rush to dispatch a call, it may actually cost you more in three ways. One, the problem isn't really solved, but you leave the customer thinking it is, prompting the need for a callback. Two, the customer is going to be even angrier when they find out that their problem hasn't been resolved and they have to call back. And three, they may not call back, they may just stop being a customer."

So what can managers do to stop the rush to end calls quickly, without resolving the customer's issue or solving his problem? "Take time to pause," Guilmartin says. "Suspending the urge to react instantly when the stakes are high reflects awareness and strength of character — the ability to listen, to learn, and to control the interaction."

### Understanding when to pause

According to Guilmartin, "A pause can be as simple as not responding immediately to something someone says, does, or writes. It can be a matter of seconds, a minute, an hour, or a day. It can also be that one deep breath. It's any space between an action and a reaction. It's the safety mechanism offering you an opportunity to make a different choice than the one you might make if you speed ahead fueled by what you think you know, see, or hear."

**Group Discussion** Try sharing this definition with reps during your next staff meeting or team meeting. Make sure that reps know that the length of

### Learn what triggers your emotions

**Exercise** One situation in which reps should take time to pause is when customers say or do something that triggers an automatic reaction — when they are likely to take something personally because they feel they are being manipulated, pressured, blindsided, snapped at, or lied to. To help, take yourself through the following exercise offered by Nance Guilmartin in her book, *The Power of Pause*:

Think about the situations in which you are likely to be triggered," she says, "and ask yourself now, or the next time that you are having a strong reaction to something that someone said or did:

- *What event, words, action, type of person or behavior set me off, triggering a rapid reaction that kept me from being or doing my best?*
- *What really bothers me most is when someone ....*

Guilmartin says that answering these two questions will raise reps awareness of the types of situations that will trigger them, increasing their ability to pause. As a result, they will be less likely to take things personally, and more able to shift to neutral and stay in control of their reactions.

their pause will depend on the situation, and they might want to fill it with a transitional phrase of some kind, but that they shouldn't be afraid to use it, especially if they are feeling harried.

You may also want to go over Guilmartin's cues that it is time to pause. (See the box on page two of this month's issue of *The Customer Communicator*.) Guilmartin lists things like "when the customer is aggressive and in a hurry," "when something the customer says doesn't make sense," "when you find yourself taking what the customer says personally," and others.

Ask reps to think about other situations in which a pause might have helped them to handle a customer interaction better, and think about other cues that might be added to Guilmartin's list.

### Pause to debrief

Another good time for a pause is after a difficult call. Guilmartin suggests that this might be a good time to pause for "debriefing." "Just take a deep breath and ask yourself what went right or wrong during that previous call," she says.

**Coaching** As a coaching aid, you can ask reps to keep a log or journal of such calls, and their thoughts afterwards. Have them take a few moments to write out what happened, what the difficulties were and how they were resolved, what issues and obstacles arose, and how things might have been handled better. Review these logs with reps during individual coaching sessions.

Guilmartin feels it is especially important for managers and supervisors to pass customer comments about reps back to reps and to discuss successes. "They need to go to talk to the rep and say, 'This is what the customer told me about your performance this afternoon, and I want to pass it along

to you. But tell me, how were you able to do that? What enabled you to pull that off at 3 p.m. in the afternoon near the end of your shift? What gave you that idea?"

In a sense, Guilmartin says, the supervisor does for the rep what the rep should do for the customer — take a pause and get curious. "You can help the rep with his or her debriefing by asking, not *what* the rep did to get a successful resolution with the customer, but *how* they did it," she says. And that's the information that you will want other reps to know and understand at your next staff meeting.

### Pause to show appreciation

**Feedback** One of the key signs of employee engagement is when employees feel that their work is appreciated. And Guilmartin suggests that another way that managers can make use of the pause in their own work routine is to show appreciation. "Just take a moment to verbally or even mentally appreciate what someone else has done. Taking a step back and showing appreciation lets others see that you value learning lessons from what's working and what's not working," she says.

But to make your expression of appreciation count:

- **Be specific.** "Specificity makes what you are saying more believable, and less easy to be deflected," she says.
- **Provide timely feedback.** Offer timely and balanced assessments along with suggestions on how reps can be even more effective.
- **Appreciate the little things.** Don't wait for something big to happen before showing appreciation.

Contact: Nance Guilmartin, [www.nanceguilmartin.com](http://www.nanceguilmartin.com). Guilmartin's book, *The Power of Pause*, is published by Jossey-Bass, [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com). ■

## SkillSharpener

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