13 Things Nobody In Your Office Should Ever Say, And What They *Should* Say, Instead.

Or….
How to Keep Your "But" Out of Your Mouth

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Each day, every day, colleagues throughout your office, including assistants and front desk staff who have direct interactions with your customers, are unwittingly shooting themselves in the feet. They're using "powerless" expressions that interfere with your desire to project that positive, customer-friendly, "can do attitude" that you want to get across with every customer contact.

In fact, chances are that *you* say many of these same things yourself without even realizing it.

There's nothing wrong with the words themselves; they're probably being spoken correctly. It's just that the impact they have on the listener is a far cry from how you want people to perceive you and your organization. The quality of the service you provide is NOT the deciding factor when customers determine their loyalty; it's how they feel about the way they're treated when they phone and visit your facility.

In this "White Paper" I will identify the 13 most common offenders: words and phrases that your personnel are using with customers all day long without even realizing the effect they're having. In each case, of course, I'll show you what to say instead.

1. "I'll have to..."

There's nothing at all unusual about hearing your receptionist say, "I'll have to check the appointment calendar..." or "I'll have to check with someone about that..." or "I'll have to check to make sure that we can do that." The trouble with this phrasing is that it indicates to the customer that taking the action is a *burden* of rather than a pleasure. "I'll have to" translates to, "I don't *want* to help you, but if I must, I guess I will."

We want every customer in every interaction to come away with the feeling that we are truly pleased to be of service. So, why use phrasing which suggests that serving them is a burden? This phrasing example is perhaps the most pervasive and the simplest to change of them all. Any time a member of your staff is about to say, "I'll have to...," replace that phrasing with "I'll be glad to...," or "I'll be happy to...," or "I'd like to.…"

It's easy to hear the contrast yourself. Notice the difference in the impressions you get if you hear a receptionist say, "I'll be happy to check the appointment schedule," compared with, "I'll have to check the appointment schedule." If you were the customer, would you feel better about hearing the receptionist say, "I'll have to get the manager to check for you," or, "I'll be glad to get to the manager to check for you?"

Let's not overlook the effect that change in phrasing has on your staff members, in addition to your customers. If your receptionist were to carry around one of those shiny chrome "clickers" that turnstile attendants use to count guests entering a stadium, she could keep track of how many opportunities there are to make such a replacement throughout the office day. If she gave the counter a quick click each time she heard herself start to say, "I'll have to..." the number would likely exceed 100 during a typical workday.

That doesn't *only* mean that she projected 100 slightly negative messages to your customers. *She also heard herself* each time she said it. Your most important and critical listener is... yourself! If your receptionist goes through the day saying, " I'll have to..., I'll have to..., I'll have to...," her brain quickly gets the message that working in your office is a tiring burden. Replacing "I'll have to," with "I'll be glad to," creates a more positive impression on every customer, and also helps to boost office morale.

2. "I'll try to..."

It's so common to say things like, "I'll try to get back to you right after lunch." The trouble is, every time you use the word "try" you're telegraphing to the listener... and to yourself... that this isn't a firm commitment and follow-through should not necessarily be expected. I'm sure you've noticed that you have a completely different impression of a person's likelihood of following through when you hear them say what they <u>will</u> do instead of what they will <u>try</u> to do.

Once again there are two crucial listeners involved. While it's true that the customer gains the impression that you're not exactly committed to following through, the "I'll try" phrase has an even more important effect on the person who speaks it. It's a way of "letting yourself off the hook" so you feel that it's not really all that important to do what you said you would do. After all, if you say you'll, "try to call back after lunch," and don't get around to following-through, you haven't really broken a promise. You never really made a promise!

I urge you and your staff to purge "I'll try..." from your office vocabulary. Instead, make definitive statements about what you "will do." This helps to project a definitive "gets things done" image for your staff members and for your entire office, and also assists staff members in actually following through. They hear themselves making a commitment and realize that they are now accountable.

3. "That's a problem."

When the customer hears someone in your office say, "We have a problem with the your file...," or, "scheduling an phone appointment for you next week is going to be a real problem...," what is the impression that you convey? "Bad news ahead … this is going to be difficult ... here's a situation I'd like to avoid...." It's just natural human nature that we want to *avoid* "problems" because they are so closely associated with negative outcomes. Everybody wants a "problem-free" life. Yet, there are difficult situations such as fitting an appointment into an already solidly booked week.

So, here's what you can say instead: "Scheduling your appointment next week may be a challenge, and I'll do my best for you." There's a huge psychological difference between the term "problem" and "challenge." We seek to flee from problems. Nobody wants to have more problems in life. Challenges, though, are a different matter. When we encounter challenges we "rise to the occasion" and marshal our creative resources to deal with the challenging situation.

When you encourage your staff to substitute the word "challenge" any time they would otherwise use "problem", you project a more positive and helpful image for your office, while at the same time helping to combat fatigue and drudgery for your staff. Notice how differently you, yourself, feel as you hear yourself say, "Dealing with this vendor is a real problem." Now say the same thing with just that one change: "Dealing with this vendor is a real challenge." We just naturally do not seek to embrace problem situations and we look for ways to escape from them. Challenges, on the other hand, give us the opportunity to unleash our creative resources to come up with solutions. We look forward to the inner satisfaction that comes from having dealt with them.

Replace "problem" with "challenge" and you'll get more positive results.

4. "I'm only just a..."

Every member of your office staff plays a critical role in the overall functioning of your office. Some members of your staff may think of themselves as having roles that are relatively unimportant. The receptionist, when asked a technical question, may excuse herself by saying, "I'm just the receptionist so I wouldn't be able to answer that." Notice the difference it makes to your customers and to the receptionist's self-esteem when she says instead, "I'm responsible for managing the office and making sure that the front office works well. Yours is a technical question and I'll be happy to transfer you to a colleague."

Your technician might say something similar; "I wouldn't be able to transfer that phone call for you because I'm just a technician so you'll need to talk with the receptionist about that." The trouble is that words like " just" and "only" are belittling terms. True enough, your technicians may not have the expertise to teleconference or transfer calls. That certainly doesn't mean the technician is unskilled. Your receptionist may have very little technical knowledge, yet the function he or she plays in managing your office is a crucial role.

Using belittling terms to describe one's own position has the effect of undermining self-worth. Each member of your team deserves to be rightfully proud of the role he or she plays in your practice.

Be on the alert and purge belittling terms to so that your staff reflects their important roles.

5. "I got lucky."

As a manager, when you complete a particularly difficult procedure, such as handling an irate customer, would you congratulate yourself by saying, "I got lucky on that customer"? Of course not. In your personal de-briefing following such a procedure, you identify what you did right to produce the positive outcome. You'd never attribute your success with a specific procedure, or with growing a healthy, profitable office to a simple stroke of good luck.

When things go right, whether you've successfully completed a challenging procedure or a member of your staff has resolved an especially difficult situation, the most helpful and appropriate course to take is to identify what you did that worked well. I'm not talking about boasting and proclaiming, "I'm the greatest, that's why I got positive results!"

Very few of the triumphs you may experience in your office may be fully attributed to good fortune that is outside your control. Positive outcomes almost always result primarily from good decisions, excellent judgment, and skillful action that you and your staff have undertaken. The advantage of giving yourself credit when things go right is that you help yourself to analyze the factors that led to the positive outcome so that you can replicate those steps when facing similar situations in the future. This is a crucial element of what business people call, "continuous process improvement," and it's also an important part of building self-esteem.

Don't give "dumb luck" the credit for the successes you and your staff bring about in your office. Each time things go right, ask yourself, "What did I do to create that success, so that I can do it again?"

6. "I failed."

Obviously, things aren't always going to go right. Appointment schedules will get messed up. Some procedures may not produce the outcomes that you intend. Some customer relationships may become uncomfortable and terminate before you would like them to. When a person in your office messes up, whether it's a technician who missed something obvious or a receptionist who transferred a call to the wrong colleague, it's tempting to view the situation as a "failure."

In life, as in your office, the individuals who experience the greatest long-term success are those who make the most mistakes. While that sounds odd at first, the reality is that high-achievers experiment, take risks, embrace new challenges, and seek to continually learn more and improve. Individuals who experience far less success withdraw when they encounter setbacks. Rather than learning the lessons inherent in such "failures," they decide not to take any more risks. They get stuck. Worse yet, when things don't go right in the future, they seek to cover up and hide their perceived shortcomings.

Replace the phrase "I failed," with "I learned." Whenever things don't go exactly right, look for the lessons that can be learned from the situation so it will occur less often in the future. I've always liked what Henry Ford had to say: "Failure is the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently."

7. "If only I had..."

Winners in life, and winning members of your staff, keep their sights firmly focused on the future and what they can do to make it better. When there's a setback or a "failure," they get busy figuring out what lessons can be learned. Losers tend to wallow in the past. They look back with regret and self-derision and beat themselves up about mistakes they may have made.

The trouble with focusing on the past is that there's not a darn thing you can do to change it. Fixating on what you may have done wrong previously keeps you stuck in the past. While it's certainly helpful to do a post-event-analysis to determine where crucial decisions or actions went astray, the only real way to move forward and avoid such situations in the future is to focus on what you intend to do now and as you move ahead.

Alexander Graham Bell said:

> "When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us."

Encourage members of your staff to replace, "If only I had...," with "Starting now, I will..."

8. "Customers make me so upset when..."

In my view, the most important fundamental lessons to learn about life have to do with "personal responsibility." When a scheduled visitor arrives late for an appointment, we commonly hear, "Traffic was just awful." Sure, blame the traffic. It would be so much more accurate... not to mention responsible... to say, "Since traffic is often congested at this time of day, I ought to have planned better and left earlier. As it is, my lack of punctuality is in fact the direct result of my inadequate planning."

Of course, nobody talks that way. It's much easier to absolve oneself of personal responsibility and blame the circumstances outside our control.

By the same token, when customers are frequently late, it's tempting for us to use that same responsibility-avoiding phrasing: "These customers make me so upset when they are always late for their appointments." The fact is that customers do have a tendency to be late. That condition is not likely to change. What the members of your staff can do is choose to make the best of the situation by exercising their personal responsibility. Rather than simply blaming customers' lack of punctuality, as valid as that may be, a truly responsible staff member faces the situation and says, "I've noticed that customers have a tendency to be late for their appointments. Let me figure out what I can do to improve the situation. In addition to sending out the reminder postcards, I can also call them the day before. When I do reach them with a reminder call, I can ask them to arrive 10 minutes early in light of the tight scheduling. I can also offer them the opportunity to reschedule for a future date if their plans make it unlikely that they'll get here on time.

The people who experience the greatest success in life, and who make the best staff members in your office, are people who accept personal responsibility rather than blaming others when things don't go the way they'd like. Instead of saying, "Those customers make me so upset when..." focus on saying, "I feel upset when I confront situation XYZ; What actions can I take to improve the situation?"

9. "But..."

Suppose you sit down to have an annual review with a member of your staff and you begin by saying, "Darlene, you've had a very good first year here, but…" You know that she's immediately going to be on guard and prepared to hear some form of criticism or other bad news. It's only natural because the word "but" is perceived as an "opposition" or "contradiction" word. We use it when we want to put to ideas in opposition to each other. "She's excellent on the phone, <u>but</u> her office appearance is rather sloppy."

One of the negative effects of using the word "but" is that it creates conflict between ideas and also between people. If your hygienist says to you, "Our tooth whitening system is quite effective, but it requires you to make several follow-up office visits," you first get the idea that the system is a good one and then start hearing the "bad news " that limits its appeal. The simple substitution of "and" for "but" makes a significant difference: "Our tooth whitening system is quite effective, <u>and</u> we ensure the best outcome with several follow-up office visits."

You can detect a subtle downturn in enthusiasm just about every time you use the word "but." Strive to consistently substitute "and" and you'll find that you generate more cooperation among customers and others while at the same time opening your own receptivity to ideas. Keep your but out of your mouth.

10. "Is everything satisfactory?"

Does this sound familiar? You're dining with a companion at a restaurant that you feel is overpriced and over-hyped. You both agree that the service has been slow and you're really not very impressed with the food quality, not to mention the server's attitude. As you finish your meal, the waiter tosses out a perfunctory, "Is everything satisfactory?" Most of the time, most of us say, "Yes, it was fine." Why don't we tell the truth? The answer is simple: We can tell that the server didn't really want to hear the truth because of the way the question was phrased. Think of how much more willing you would be to offer constructive feedback if the server had said, "We're always looking for ways to improve our service. What's one thing we should be working a little harder on?"

Do you take the time to poll your customers and find out how satisfied they are with your office right now? Even when used, most feedback vehicles are designed to measure satisfaction (and usually do a poor job of that) rather than make it easy for customers to show us what we need to do differently to serve them better.

One limitation of the typical "Is everything satisfactory?" approach is that it takes the form of a yes/no question, and that doesn't provide us with much useful information. Your office is a business. Businesses avoid being blind-sided by unhappy customers and benefit from service and product enhancements when they take the trouble to find out what their customers really think. You don't get that from any simple yes/no question.

I urge you to make direct phone contact with at least a sampling of your customers. Some of the calls you should make personally to get firsthand feedback. Your most sensitive customer-oriented staff members may conduct others. Whenever you make those calls, be sure to do away with the typical "Is everything satisfactory?" Instead, use the approach that's going to get much more valuable input: "We're always looking for ways to improve the way we serve our customers. Since you just had a conversation with one of my colleagues yesterday and the experience is fresh in your mind, would you tell me two or three things you noticed we could be doing better?"

11. "I disagree."

The trouble with the word "disagree" is that it somehow magically transforms itself midway between your mouth and the listener's ear. Although you didn't really say, "You're wrong and my opinion has much more validity than yours," that's what the other person hears. Whether you're talking with a member of your staff, or with a customer, beware! As soon as you say to the other person, "I disagree with you," you're setting yourself up for conflict.

People want to be right. When you say, "I disagree with your opinion," people have a tendency to interpret that comment as meaning that you are saying, "You're wrong!" At that point they get busy mentally preparing to prove that they are actually right.

When you're having a discussion about potential courses of action... maybe you're talking with a potential customer about the wisdom of investing in your products or services, or talking with a member of your staff about one of the office policies, resist the urge to utter the word *disagree*. It's sure to create conflict. You're much better off to replace it with, "I understand what you're saying, and at the same time..."

12. "Do you understand? Do you have any questions?"

There are two reasons why this form of question will not get you very far. Presumably, you're asking it because you want to be sure that you and the customer or staff member have a clear understanding between yourselves. The trouble is that asking this question only gives you the other person's opinion about whether or not he or she understands. To be a superb communicator it's necessary to take some extra steps.

First, be aware that this form of question may well put the listener on the defensive. To embrace the notion of personal responsibility, you're much better off to say, "I want to be sure I explained that clearly enough." In other words, focus on finding out whether or not you did a good job of making something clear rather than on determining whether the listener is intellectually capable of grasping your meaning. This is another instance of a seemingly harmless everyday expression that we all tend to use without thinking about how it can have unintended consequences. You say, "Do you understand?" The other person may hear, "He thinks I'm a kind of stupid and can't keep up with him so now he's putting me to some sort of test to see if I kept up." Of course that's not what you meant. Yet, it may well be what the other person thought you intended. So, prevent this possibility by clearly phrasing the question in a way that shows you are personally responsible: "I want to be sure I said what I meant. What did you hear?"

Second, you're best off to avoid all yes/no questions. Rather than asking if your customer or staff member has questions, ask, "What questions do you have?" If there are none, it's easy for your listener to say so. This form of question makes it much easier for the listener to reveal what is not exactly crystal clear so that you can clarify further.

13. "To tell you the truth."

Just what is that supposed to mean? Do you usually *not* tell the truth? This is just one example of the many habitual phrases that beg questions about your ongoing integrity: "To be perfectly honest...," "Frankly...," "Let me level with you.…"

What these phrases have in common is that they signal to the listener that you do not have 100% integrity. If you did, it would not be necessary to alert your listener to the fact that you're about to parcel out a rare morsel of truth.

There is no substitute phrase I recommend for "To tell you the truth." Rather, I recommend an action: _Live the truth_! Be sure that every member of your staff knows that your company is founded upon the principle of dealing openly and honestly with all customers and vendors. There is absolutely no substitute for conducting your business with the highest level of personal integrity.

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