



The Baron
Group, Inc.

March, 2009

Oh, Those Unreturned Phone Calls!

Many of us complain about the lack of courtesy in business today. “Whatever happened to business courtesy?” is a question many people ask quite often. This tip will address that conundrum.

It seems like it has almost become the norm not to return a phone call unless it’s necessary. Since most phone calls result in voice mail messages, we usually ask the recipient to call back. And they usually don’t.

Not to worry. We are not revisiting the voice mail discussion. We’ve done that.

What we are going to investigate is why people don’t return phone calls and how to deal with it.

The “why” is based on interviews that we have conducted and some educated guessing. And your guess is as good as ours. But here is what we believe is the issue.

Let’s assume value. People are busy. Most prefer email as a way to communicate. Nobody has enough time. The return call to a colleague or client is more important than the return call to a vendor or supplier. Think of your own behavior as a buyer. Who do you call back first—your client or the broker who’s trying to sell you insurance?

Many people also seem to think that when they don’t return a call that they are, in fact, sending a message—either the timing isn’t good, there’s nothing to add, or they’re just not interested. So by not calling back, they are communicating a great deal. Unfortunately, it is a message we would prefer not to get. And it’s not the most gracious way to communicate.

The last impression we want to create when we pursue business is one of desperation. We are even more unlikely to win the business when we send the client that kind of message. So calling over and over again does more harm than good. We’ve heard too many people say that even though it shows determination and tenacity, when people call too many times, it turns them off.

One salesperson we worked with recently used a line that we really like: “I like to walk the fine line between showing I am interested and not being a pain in the neck.”

So what do we do? Some people use the “three strike rule.” If they don’t get the call back after three times, they don’t try again for a fixed period of time—three months, six months, whatever. At the same time we are hearing that calling more than three times in today’s environment can work for you, especially if the customer is simply not returning your calls out of habit and is in fact interested in what you offer. However, be careful because you don’t want to annoy the customer. An alternative is to call other people in the company for help.

We are not thrilled with any of these approaches. And there may be an alternative worth considering. One that many of you have probably tried is what we'd like to discuss: **The brief email message.**

Everybody checks email all the time. Some people do little else. We're all in contact with our internal and external colleagues electronically every day.

It is a lot easier for most people to send a quick reply to an email than to pick up the phone. So let's send emails and ask for a quick response. But do it in a non-punitive, professional way that demonstrates your sensitivity and empathy, e.g.,

"Hi Steve:

Sorry it's been so hard to connect. I know it's a busy time for you. The reason I have been calling is to learn _____ . If you can reply with a quick response about I can arrange to speak with you, I would certainly appreciate it.

Very truly yours,"

You will figure out dozens of alternative approaches to this, but here are some guidelines:

- Use a positive, upbeat tone
- Reference that you have been calling
- Let them know that you understand why they don't call back ("I know it's a busy time...")
- Tell them *why* you have been calling
- Ask them to respond
- Don't punish them... ever"

Again, you will figure out many ways to do this. And you will find clever ways to do this as well. Here's an example a friend of ours used not too long ago:

"Hi John,

I am confused.

When we met, you indicated that you were very interested in moving forward.

But in spite of my attempts, we haven't been able to connect.

I would love a quick update."

He received an email the next day that started with these words: "Sorry about the confusion" and then went on to explain why he hadn't called back and that he would like to meet in 4-6 weeks.

The shortest example we know about came from one of our clients. He sent a very short email to one of his prospective clients:

"Should I persist or desist?"

The client responded with a one word email: "Persist." He eventually won the business.

Now, these don't always work nor do they always get responses. They don't have to be short; in fact, they can be quite long. And they don't have to be clever, though that can be fun. But sending the email and asking for a brief, direct response seems to get the client to take action more often than in the case of a voice mail message.

There is a downside, to be sure. It is easier to reject you electronically than face-to-face. Your messages could be misinterpreted. The client may even find it annoying. You may get "zapped" without them even reading it, so they never even get your message. Moreover, it's permanent, and if not done well, it can be forwarded or saved.

But if you've made a few calls, haven't gotten a call back, and want to be proactive, send that email. You will be surprised at how many more people respond electronically than verbally.