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It's your call

Here's what to consider when using the telephone for negotiations

Question:

It seems like a majority of my negotiation discussions take place on the telephone. Either distance or timing makes it impossible to schedule a face-to-face meeting for each issue that needs to be resolved. What are the pluses and minuses of using the phone?

Answer:

Interestingly, well over 70% of negotiations take place on the telephone. Whether it's negotiating a single point, or completing the whole transaction from quote to closure, the majority of negotiations are resolved using the telephone.

While telephone conversations are more personal than written communications, they are less personal than face-to-face meetings. You lose non-verbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions and body language. That can be disconcerting to some people who want to see the other party. For others, it's actually a benefit; they gain greater emotional control when they don't have to be distracted by the other party's physical gestures.

Advantages

Negotiations over the telephone have the following advantages:

1. Fewer non-verbal distractions – If you are someone who is intimidated by authority figures or easily distracted by body language, the telephone may be an effective tool. By not having to focus on the other party's intimidating stature or distracting movements, you can maintain your emotional balance and feeling of control. This gives you the freedom to intently focus on the words, delivery and meaning of the conversation.

2. Vocal cues become more pronounced – You can tell by the tone of the person's voice if he or she is being deceptive, is feeling "put on the spot," or is unprepared. The person's choice of wording and delivery reveal a lot. A pause, hesitation or use of filler words like ah or um are clues that the other party has been taken off guard. Proceed with caution.

3. Shorter, more focused conversations – As a general rule, people who negotiate on the phone get right to the point. They don't spend a lot of time talking about frivolous topics. They are prepared with the information they need or typically have a list of questions they

want to ask.

In scheduling your telephone meetings, here are some guidelines in setting the length of time: If the other party is talking without a headphone set, you can expect his or her concentration to last about 90 minutes. At that point, the neck, hand and back will become stiff and uncomfortable. On the other hand, if the person is using a hands-free headset, you can expect his or her concentration to last up to 2.5 hours.

4. It's easier to say "no" – When talking on the phone, it's a lot easier to say "no" without a lengthy explanation than if you were at a face-to-face meeting.

Questions that may not be "appropriate" when meeting face-to-face, can be easily "slipped" in. This is a common tactic that you can work to your advantage if you are the one asking the questions. Remember though, to use discretion and tact. People have long memories when they know they have been ambushed.

Additionally, if you are someone who finds yourself agreeing to things that you don't want to do, you need to practice setting boundaries and learning the many ways to say "no" gracefully.

5. Greater conversation control – When you place an unexpected call to the other party, you have an advantage. Since you initiated the call, the conversation will naturally take your lead. Be mindful today that most people do not enjoy unscheduled phone appointments, especially if they take a great deal of time. While this strategy can work to your advantage, be aware that you are an interruption and may be catching them at a bad time.

Similarly, if you receive an unplanned call and your guard is down, unexpected questions may trigger you to disclose information that, later, you wished you hadn't. The key to handling this type of situation is learning to say, "Let me get back to you on that." Refrain from being pressured into revealing information. You can't take back words that have already been spoken.

Disadvantages

Negotiating over the phone also has some disadvantages. Weigh these against your needs:

1. Distractions – For some people who work in a cubicle situation, phone negotiating may be difficult. The quiet needed to fully concentrate does not exist. Loud conversations, people dropping things on your desk, colleagues walking behind you, or standing at the corner of your office, all create distractions that interrupt your ability to think clearly.

2. Lack of non-verbal signals – For those who influence others with their body language, or need to see the other party's reactions to judge what to do next, phone negotiations are stressful. They restrict their natural style of com-

municating. They feel pressured which often causes their insecurities to surface.

In most cases, the other party senses this uneasiness. While they may not know or understand the cause, they react and become guarded or cautious. This perpetuates anxiety between the two parties causing unwarranted dissension.

3. Exaggerated behavior – When negotiating with people who lack certain social or verbal skills, be warned that those gaps may become even more pronounced when they talk on the phone. Their inadequacies become exaggerated, causing them to come across as short-tempered, confrontational and defensive.

Maintaining your composure and social grace is important when dealing with such individuals. As much as possible, do not take their comments personally. If the negotiation is important to you, redirect their attention while making them feel in control as much as possible. If the negotiation is not important to you, it may be in your best interest to just to walk away.

4. Cut-off/Ending the call now – During a telephone negotiation, it's much easier to end the call at any time during the discussion. While this behavior may be perceived as rude, it is easier to receive forgiveness when having to cut a phone call short as opposed to a face-to-face meeting.

To minimize this risk, define the duration when scheduling the phone call.

Used in the right format, phone negotiations are an effective strategy. They can advance a negotiation quickly, allowing you to meet an important deadline to close a deal.

Be selective in choosing a telephone call as the right strategy. Assess your own preferences and the desired outcomes you want to achieve. Be sure to take into account the nuances of the situation, especially if you are negotiating with someone you have never met.

Regardless of the approach you choose, remember be prepared. Confidence and competence are by-products of preparation and are essential to achieving negotiating success.



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