

## **Go to Zero**

*By David B. Burns*

As a customer service professional, dealing with difficult customers is a fact of life. How well you manage those difficult customers (both external and internal) is a major part of your success. Equally important is your ability to manage yourself after your contact with the difficult customer ends. You need to leave that encounter behind, because you can't afford to infect the next customer with the stress, frustration, or anger you picked up from the previous one.

Yes, I know there are some boneheads out there. Customers can sometimes be nasty, ill-mannered, and even vulgar. But your next customer doesn't care. Your customers only care about the issue for which they called. And just like they don't care about your difficult external customers, they also don't care about your difficult internal customers: your co-workers, your boss, or your spouse . . . or even all three at the same time. Your job is to be professional - every time - even when you don't feel like it.

To stay professional, to keep from infecting the next customer with baggage from a previous one, you need to "Go to Zero." Going to Zero means returning to a poised, professional state where you are prepared to serve your customers well. Going to Zero is accomplished by creating a personal "conditioning ritual." This conditioning ritual is a simple action or thought that, when you do it or think it, automatically brings you back to that poised, professional state. In other words, gets you back to "Zero."

Physical rituals can be as simple as taking a few deep breaths, or tensing all your muscles and then releasing that tension as you exhale. If you work in a call-center environment, you may only have a second or two between calls. Gently snapping a thin rubber band on your wrist will quickly remind you to get back to your poised, professional state.

Mental rituals include counting down from three to zero, returning to your ready state. Another method is to create the habit of reminding yourself what your job is really about - making it easy for people to do business with your company.

Non-call-center businesses usually have a policy of answering the phone by a certain number of rings, often three or four. Seldom is there a minimum number. Try answering the phone on the second ring, using the first ring as your Go-to-Zero bell. Taking those extra three seconds to collect yourself will have a dramatic impact on your professionalism, and ultimately your results. One membership-based company I worked with improved their info-call-to-enrollment ratio by 12%, simply by adopting the answer-on-the-second-ring guideline.

Managing yourself is a critical factor in serving customers and is doubly important with those nasty, ill-mannered, and vulgar ones. Learning to say "Go to Zero" after each of your difficult encounters will add a powerful tool to your Customer Service Tool Kit and, as a result, improve your ability to serve all your customers well.

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