



# THE TELEPHONE

## Your Marketing Lifeline



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**The phone — that plastic intrusion into our otherwise ordered lives. What does it mean to you? An indispensable aid to doing business? A lifeline, providing you with instant access to information and counsel? Or perhaps you think it's nothing more than a damned nuisance and Alexander Bell has a lot to answer for!**

There are many different opinions on the value of the phone, but most solicitors would agree that it's absolutely crucial to the development of a modern law practice. Judging by the millions of dollars solicitors spend every year on Yellow Pages advertisements around Australia, a great many law firms are "convinced" that the phone is an effective marketing tool. Yet how many solicitors use the phone properly to help bring in business?

I hope that the 10 practitioners I contacted to find out how well solicitors generally use the phone in handling prospective client enquiries will forgive me for taking up a few minutes of their valuable time on my fictional business problem. All 10 of the firms I tested had run large display advertisements in the Yellow Pages and I wanted to know how they would handle the sort of enquiry that they presumably hoped to attract.

Here's a typical conversation:

Prospective client is put through to solicitor:

*Solicitor:* Yes?

*Prospect:* I've got a problem and I'm at my wits end. I think I need a solicitor to help me...(explains problem).

*Solicitor:* If I understand your problem correctly, we will need to ...(explains what steps are required).

*Prospect:* How much will it cost?

*Solicitor:* Well, that depends...(then explains in length on what it depends)... Anyway, at your first consultation and once I've seen the documentation I'll be in a better position to advise you on costs.

*Prospect:* Do you charge for the first consultation?

*Solicitor:* Yes we do. Our hourly rate is \$170.00

*Prospect:* Thank you, I'll think about it and phone you back.

Naturally you would handle an enquiry call more skilfully than this.

For one thing you would introduce yourself by name when answering the phone. I must have picked an unusual 10 solicitors for my survey because only two of them actually gave his or her name. The other eight must have assumed that if the receptionist says to the caller "I'll put you through to Mr Turner", that is sufficient introduction.

Well, no, it's not sufficient. If I'm making an initial telephone enquiry about anything, whether it's to enquire about the price of a dining room table, or about engaging a solicitor, I feel I'm entitled to talk to someone who is approachable and friendly. I definitely feel put out if the first word I hear is an abrupt-sounding "yes". What's wrong with saying: "Good morning, this is Graham Turner"? It doesn't take much effort and it conveys a professional and courteous attitude ... something which is pretty important to me as a prospective client. Apart from solicitors not introducing themselves, what else did I find in my survey?

Well, the good news is that most solicitors, once over that first hurdle, come over as helpful, professional and friendly. There was one very notable exception: a solicitor who made it clear my enquiry was not especially welcome and even fended off my suggestion that an appointment might be in order! I was left wondering why his firm had spent in excess of \$5000 on a Yellow Pages advertisement if they treat all enquiries it generates like mine.

Clients want to be considered unique and special. The trick is to sound vitally interested in the problem — whatever it is. The way to do this is by listening attentively and asking some open-ended questions. Most experienced solicitors are quite well versed in these important communication skills. Those that aren't had better brush up because clients are no longer prepared to put up with poor communicators.

Probably the most critical area that the solicitors surveyed really didn't perform well in was this: not one of them made any real, sustained effort to encourage the prospect to come in for an initial consultation. In fact, rather than making clear the benefits of an initial appointment, most of the solicitors

immediately put an obstacle in the way by referring to how much they charged for the first consultation. Only two of the 10 solicitors volunteered that the first appointment was free.

Do the solicitors who charge for an initial consultation seriously believe that, in this day and age, prospective clients will make a decision about engaging them on the phone without first meeting them face-to-face? It takes real chutzpah to charge \$150 an hour and more ... effectively to give the prospect the opportunity to decide whether to proceed. It is a bit like a salesman demanding a fee from you for his pitch.

Making it possible for a prospect to see you without the clock running from the first minute is just the first step. You're still not doing any favours to anyone. You have to make it worthwhile for the prospect to come in and see you rather than the other solicitors he may have picked out of the Yellow Pages.

You have to give some benefits of the meeting and build commitment to it. None of the solicitors surveyed seriously attempted this. Some did suggest an initial consultation, but these half-hearted efforts were immediately negated by a discussion about how much they were going to charge. None of them said, for example: "I've got some time available tomorrow afternoon. How about you popping in to see me so that we can discuss your problem in more detail and work out a plan of action that will sort it out? There will be no charge at all for the appointment."

Solicitors are beginning to become more adept at marketing their services. Certainly they are spending a lot more money and energy on advertising, developing marketing data bases and in public relations activities. All of this investment is aimed at getting the phone to ring. And when it does ring, do the solicitors in your firm capitalise on that investment, or do they waste it by poor telephone skills? At the very least, you should have every enquiry call logged and a suitable lead sheet completed so that you can monitor your rate of conversion of enquiries to paying matters.

If the enquiries you're generating are not converting to new work and new clients at a satisfactory rate, then you need to have a hard look at both your initial consultation charging policy and how your solicitors are performing on the phone. Your firm's marketing plan should include telephone training for everyone in your firm who deals with your clients and prospective clients on the phone.