

CHELLA HAS THE BEST ANSWERS AT HER FINGERTIPS

ANSWERING the phone badly is like saying 'I don't want your business' to callers," says Cambridge-based businesswoman Chella Hayes. She believes that many business owners fail to grasp the opportunity that incoming telephone calls present, and as a result are losing business.

Chella's insights into telephone interactions are put to good use by her company, Zoom Answer Call, which she set up in 1998. Prior to this she had been selling vehicle tracking devices. "There were only two of us in the business, and one of our customers commented that they were very impressed with the way we answered the phone, because it made them believe they were dealing with a large organisation. This comment got me thinking about the way small businesses in particular answer their phones, and that led me to establish Zoom."



BUSINESS WOMAN CHELLA HAYES

Zoom Answer Call is a sophisticated telephone answering service that offers call centre services, virtual reception, and even customer helplines, sales-lines and support services for a diverse selection of businesses, from large pharmaceutical companies to dog training providers.

The company has grown to a team of 13 people, and has around 250 clients. Companies use Zoom for everything from simple message-taking to recruiting volunteers for clinical trials, and first level technical and IT support. One company to benefit is Cambridge Nutritional Sciences, developers of food intolerance test kits. They ran a media campaign to recruit volunteers for their 'Fresh Start' trial, designed to investigate the link between obesity and food intolerance. Having been overwhelmed by calls for a previous promotion, they published Zoom's number rather than their own, ensuring that all callers got through and received personal attention. "Companies have no way of measuring how many callers don't get through," says Chella, "so they could in theory be turning away many more calls than they answer."

The 'Zoomettes' are also used to doing first line diagnostic questionnaires for IT helplines and technical enquiries, so that callers are ultimately put through to the correct engineer or specialist for their particular problem. "As well as general training on telephone techniques, our operators are also given client-specific training, so they are prepared for complex and demanding incoming calls. This enables us to integrate seamlessly into clients' businesses, so that callers don't even realise that they're talking to an answering service.

"Our operators are all recruited from customer service backgrounds, so they are empathetic and have experience in dealing with all sorts of characters."

"If people are bothering to call in, they already have an interest in your company, but the demise of the receptionist and a lack of training in telephone answering means that many people end up having a frustrating experience. Plus, the business world now has an over-reliance on voicemail, but we have yet to develop a culture of returning messages. " As a canny businesswoman, Chella recognised that a sound business proposition and a strong team, while critical, would not be sufficient to ensure Zoom Answer Call's success. She turned to Lee Duncan, a business coach, for help and advice on how to grow the business and guarantee its future. "I met Lee at an informal event where I received some great ideas that brought results, so I decided to work on a more long-term basis with Lee.

"Initially, he assessed my business: How I felt, why I thought I needed help, and where I wanted to be. Once we'd identified my objectives he coached me, giving me the tools - books, theories and insight - to do it myself.

"My biggest personal objective was to be able to spend more time with my family. I have five year old twins, now I'm able to collect them from school, give them tea, and put them to bed. Eighteen months ago, I hardly saw them!

"Making these changes was always about creating a balance, so that I could give my best to both the business and the kids. We've actually seen a 77 per cent growth in the business since I've been working with Lee, but that's just a bonus! "Lee has gone from giving me personal advice for the business to helping the whole team. He comes and gives sales training, and has helped us to structure the management team. He's been teaching the managers responsibility and accountability."

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Having benefited from sound business advice, Chella has recently commissioned Bath University to research communication skills in business, so that she can offer help to companies who are looking to improve in this area. The research flagged up some unexpected results.

"It seems that you lose as many customers by answering the phone immediately than if you leave it to ring seven times," says Chella.

The research revealed that many callers would be caught off guard if the phone was picked up too quickly and 14 per cent would actually put down the phone if answered on the first ring. Additionally, half of all callers give up after seven rings and yet most automated services click in after eight.

"We make sure that all calls that come in to Zoom are answered after two to four rings," says Chella.



CHELLA IN HER ZOOM OFFICE

The research also found that using body language while talking on the phone can be important, despite seeming counter-intuitive. "Gesticulating, or moving your head can make your voice more animated or alter the timbre and tone of speech. This is just as important on the phone as when talking face-to-face," says Chella.

Chella is still working hard towards her final business goal - being able to take a summer holiday with her children. "We're nearly there," she says. "Not next year, but maybe the year after."

- For a copy of the white paper "Are your communication skills posing a strategic risk to your organisation?" based on research at the University of Bath, or for a case study of Zoom Answer Call's experience with business advisor Lee Duncan, email Chella Heyes at chella@zoomuk.co.uk
- For more information about Zoom Answer Call, visit www.zoomuk.co.uk