

Winning at Hiring

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Call centers are the heart and soul of an organization. Customers form an impression of you and your organization within seconds based on the person on the other end of the line. If the first impression of a call center representative is positive, customers will be pleased and continue to do business with you. Their trust level will increase, and over time, they will purchase additional products or services. Conversely, if the initial feeling is negative, customers will broadcast their displeasure. With so much at stake, it is critical that you hire those with star potential.

First and foremost, conduct a phone interview before bringing any candidate to the company for a face-to-face interview. This phone interview will allow you to do three things: a) listen to the person's voice without paying attention to body language, b) ask the person some critical questions, and c) role play a customer interaction.

The voice is the customer service representative's calling card. There are five qualities that you should notice in the voice. Your customers will notice them also, but on a subconscious level. As you listen to your candidate's voice, rate each of the following qualities on a scale of 1–5, with five being the highest. The five critical qualities are:

- **Tone** – Does the person's voice sound friendly or sincere or does it sound bored, unsure, or strident? You should feel the warmth and enthusiasm in the voice immediately. If this ingredient is missing, take a pass on the candidate.
- **Volume** – Is the person speaking too softly for the ordinary listener? If the majority of your callers are elderly or if they work in a noisy environment, volume is critical. A caller should not have strain to hear the rep, nor should the person have to ask the rep to speak up.
- **Speed** – Is the person speaking so quickly that it would be difficult to take notes or to follow the explanation? If this quality is an issue, the rep will be kept on the phone a lot longer

because callers will be asking the person to repeat. Additionally, they may ask to escalate the call, causing you personally problems down the road.

- **Clarity** – Is the articulation or diction sharp? Is the rep saying all of the syllables in the word? Do endings fade? Are there lots of “ums” and “ahs.” If clarity is at risk, listeners will see the rep as unprofessional and unconfident. They will also ask to speak to someone else or for information to be repeated, again lengthening the call. If English is the second language of the rep, listeners should not have to worry that they misheard.
- **Pitch** – Is the voice too high or too low? If the voice is too high, credibility will be an issue. The rep may be seen as young or unconfident. If the voice is too low, the rep can be seen as “grumpy.”

In addition to listening to the voice during a phone interview, ask the candidate some job-related questions and pay attention to the answers. Your overall impression should be that the candidate is well spoken and polished. Some possible questions are:

- What is your perception of the job?
- Why do you think you would be a good fit in our organization?
- What are the steps you would take to calm an upset caller?
- How do you personally want to be perceived on the phone?
- How do you think you can convey a positive image?

If the candidate has performed well thus far, go further. Ask the person to describe a process or procedure. For example, what would be the steps the individual would take to buy a car or paint a room?

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Listen closely to how the person sequences ideas. Another possibility is to ask the person to role play a situation where you are an angry caller and see how well the candidate defuses the situation. Notice any negative or tentative language.

If the applicant performs well on the phone interview, your face-to-face interview will be a mere formality. Never pursue someone that caused you doubt. Trust your instincts.

Question: *We're interested in your reaction to this article. [click here](#) – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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