Franchising is all about service. How many times have we heard that or passed it on to our staff or Franchisees – hopefully to see it enacted with the final user – The Customer.

Whilst it is great to preach this sermon, how many franchise systems actually perform in this way?

I joined a major oil company in the late ‘70s – (showing my age) and in my planned 5 months of training I had to undertake a course called Caltex Marketing Communications – 5 days, and another course called Key to Salesmanship – 5 days. One of the messages drummed into us was how do we plan and communicate with our dealers (franchisees) and distributors in a proper manner.

In the days of letters, snail mail and STD phone calls, we were taught what was reasonable in responding to certain things, and how we should prioritise our work. In these days of email and basically low cost phone calls, there is little excuse. Whilst many of us go from busy to super busy, if we were organised and sorted out many problems quickly, I am sure they may resolve much better.

From the CEO of a Franchise System, through the Executive Team to the Field Staff, should we have standards that should be followed? If so, do senior management set good examples of what should be done, or does this generation of young, enthusiastic middle and junior executives follow poor role models, and believe that is the way business should be done? What do your Franchisees and Suppliers think of the Franchise System if Business Etiquette is poor?

By Peter Buckingham

Business Etiquette: Does it still exist?
Telephone courtesy

We live in “real time” in many things we do. Social media such as twitter and text messaging makes us use to “real time” and very short responses to many things we do. So why do we have message bank on our phone – and never return the calls? It makes me laugh when I hear the standard message on a Voicemail – “Your call is important to me, and I will get back to you as soon as possible” – and then you never hear back from them.

Why not set some standards and hold people accountable to them? Maybe we should say “... and I will get back to you within 24 (or 48) hours”. If this is the case, hold the person responsible to achieve this.

Returning a call does not have to be a 30-minute exercise. Many times you are respected far more by just returning the call, and saying “hello” and I will try and handle the issue quickly, or if it is a no go, or not likely to happen for a couple of months – then say that.

Whilst it is good for everyone to have a message bank on their phone, it is really a detriment if it is poorly used. In our office, we do not have individual phone lines, and when a call comes in, it is answered by a person, and then they do their very best to handle it or pass it on to the right person. If that person is not in the office, they email to say who called and the phone number. As a service business, we do our best to get back within a few hours – even in my case over public holidays.

Do you ever ring your own business and listen to how the phone is handled? Does it ring out, or does it finally get answered in a very unprofessional way. If that is how your Franchisees, Suppliers and long term customers are exposed to your business, how do you think they feel?

I liken it to when you ring a bank or a phone company, and hear “all our operators are busy etc etc”. Should the next question be asked of Senior Management (if you could find them) “Then why don’t you put on more operators”? Try ringing a person in Comm bank if you do not have their personal number – you cannot even find a switchboard number to start with. I always like ringing AAMI for example, because a person answers the phone, and quickly!

Telephone etiquette is something that can be established in a company from the top down, and it is up to senior management to ensure the lower levels meet what you feel would be a reasonable standard.
**Email etiquette**

We all receive far too many emails and part of that is because too many people love to copy everyone in on everything. If a person is doing that, it should be up to senior management to help them understand that their job is NOT judged by how many people they copy in on every email, but making effective business decisions. Maybe my best suggestion to Microsoft would be to eliminate the “REPLY ALL” button from Outlook!

Once we do send a “reasonable email”, what is seen as a reasonable response time? Emails are often seen as the quick and easy way to communicate, and save the embarrassment of making a phone call and actually speaking to the person who you want a response from. I do note that whilst I receive many emails from Nigeria telling me they would love to partner with me in moving millions of dollars into my bank account, I can’t actually recall anyone having the gall to call me with one of those propositions!

Emails can be answered with a quick response, hopefully courteous if the subject is not offensive or stupid, and at least the sender feels they have a response – even if it is not what they wanted. I become disgusted with some clients who when they want us, expect action in minutes, and when we ask them a question at some other time, like could we buy them a coffee or catch up, then no response.

Again, my view is if I was training junior managers in my business, I would preach that you should respond to every “reasonable” email within 24 or 48 hours.

**Summary**

If you want your business to look professional, and you expect professional service from your Franchisees, think how you operate within your company. Many Franchisees are ex-Managers themselves, and have had staff, often far more than in the Franchisor’s total employment. Many know how they treated people in large companies (before becoming a Franchisee), and must pull their hair out when their Franchise business partner (Franchisor) acts unprofessionally.

I challenge you as Franchisors to look at the way your business communicates with Franchisees, other staff, customer and suppliers, and ask yourself if that is how you want to be seen? Empathy is putting yourself in the other person’s shoes, and seeing things from their point of view.

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**Peter Buckingham** is the Managing Director of Spectrum Analysis Australia Pty Ltd, the leading Geodemographic and Sales Prediction Modelling Company in Australia. He is also a Director and Vic/Tas President of the Institute of Management Consultants.

Peter is contactable by email at: peterb@spectrumanalysis.com.au or visit www.spectrumanalysis.com.au.