

The ABCs of Telephone Collections

Anticipate your needs before you start your call. Have all of the information and tools you will require ready before you dial.

Believe in your ability. If you have confidence in yourself, you will have a better chance of accomplishing what you set out to do.

Control the conversation. Be firm and businesslike. Keep in mind your goal is payment in full.

Develop a "third ear." Listen closely for clues in what is said, what isn't said, and how it's being said.

Encourage the debtor to talk. Let him tell his own story in his own way.

Focus attention on developing a definite plan of action that will completely resolve the account.

Guard against showing any signs of belligerence. A good collector can't afford a bad temper.

Help yourself by not accepting arrangements that are not in your company's best interests.

Identify the debtor, yourself, and the amount of the claim. Be sure you are talking to the person who can authorize payment.

Jot down notes as you talk to the debtor. Don't trust your memory. You need an accurate record of your telephone interviews.

Key your focus on the real problems and solutions.

Lead the debtor to develop a plan of action that will resolve the account in full. Allow the debtor to make the initial offer.

Move quickly on reasonable settlement offers by getting approval immediately.

Negotiate the most advantageous settlement possible.

Observe any signs of the debtor holding back information or making inconsistent statements. These may be a clue to his intentions.

Pause for a short time after stating the purpose of the call. This throws the burden of the conversation on the debtor and gives him the chance to offer payment or explain his reasons for nonpayment.

Quench any tendencies to preach, moralize, judge, or argue. Avoid fighting words.

Review your notes. If there are previously broken commitments, you need to keep a close eye on whether the debtor keeps future promises.

Sell the debtor on the benefits of paying the account in full.

Talk clearly and distinctly when making a collection call. If you speak too fast, train yourself to slow down. This helps avoid any possibility the debtor may misunderstand you.

Use your mistakes to improve your technique.

Vary your approach. If you're not getting through, try a different tack.

Withhold agreement to accept a partial payment until you are fully satisfied that there is no other means of obtaining payment.

X-ray and examine the facts. If you encounter a problem you can't resolve, enlist the aid of your supervisor or a more experienced collector on your team.

Yield only when you are convinced that the claim is impossible to collect.

Zero-in on every call you make. Persistence and patience pay off.

Submitted by Bob Tharnish, CCAA Certified Senior Collection Professional, Vice President, International and Corporate Quality, ABC/Amega, Inc., Buffalo, NY