



Effective telephone etiquette maximizes reservations

Just 15 or 20 years ago, travelers typically sent a letter asking about reservations, and innkeepers would respond by mail as well. Sounds as old-fashioned as the Pony Express, right? In those days, stamps were cheap, long-distance phone calls were expensive, and e-mail was as mysterious as $e=mc^2$. Toll-free numbers were as scarce as hen's teeth, and innkeepers debated this issue: which was worse, an impersonal telephone answering machine or an unanswered call. How fast it's all changed! Today, you can have a three-minute cross-country phone conversation for less than the cost of a first-class stamp, and running an inn without e-mail would be like running an inn without electricity!

Or are you losing reservations today because you haven't kept pace with the times? Think of every phone call, every e-mail as a sales opportunity if you want to maximize your occupancy rates. Ask yourself these five key questions to see how you're doing.

1. Do guests ever get a busy signal when they call your B&B?

"Yes" is the *wrong* answer, guys. Your business line is your life blood, and a busy signal means that the traveler will just call the next inn on their list. At best, callers will be cranky when they finally get through, and you'll have to waste time calming them down. Do not use this line for your own out-going calls, and make sure that there are separate phone lines for guest use. Dedicated lines for your modem and fax are equally essential.

2. Do you have a toll-free number?

A typical weekend B&B getaway will cost a traveler \$300-500 for lodging, food, and travel costs. Why on earth do they blink at dropping a few dimes on phone calls? It's an incomprehensible quirk of human nature, but it ain't gonna change, so bite the bullet and make sure you have toll-free numbers posted prominently on all your marketing materials. You don't want to be the B&B that's passed over for a competitor with an 800 number. As a business, you can't slide by with a toll-free number that requires an ID code or four digit extension—it's just not professional.

3. How do you answer the phone?

Answer the phone with a smile, clearly stating both your name, and the name of your B&B to set a tone of friendly professionalism. Make sure the phone is answered only by people who speak clearly and understandably. If language barriers or disabilities make this a concern—let your answering machine or voice mail take the call. If you pick up a ringing phone when you're running late for a dentist appointment, it's Murphy's Law that the person calling will want a detailed description of every guest room—let your answering machine or voice mail take the call, or the potential guest will hear the impatience in your voice.

4. What does your recorded message say?

The telephone is dead as a doornail for hours, but a dozen calls come in while you're walking the dog. Such is life. Make your recorded message helps you book rooms. Start by identifying your B&B—don't just give the phone number. Make sure the message speaks to their desires, not your needs, and set separate day-time and night-time messages. You don't

want a potential guest calling at 11 am to get a message saying that the office will re-open at 9 am.

Always, always, always give your web site address. Innkeeper Andy Aldrich of Stowe's Brass Lantern Inn, honored as Vermont B&B innkeeper of 2001, often records a message saying that he's gone off to hike or ski for a few hours, but that you can see the inn's rooms and check availability at www.brasslanterninn.com, or book on-line via his listing on BedandBreakfast.com. Then, when he returns from shoveling the walk (you didn't think he was really on the slopes!), he often finds reservation requests or real-time bookings awaiting him.

5. Are you using a "no solicitation" program?

Some phone companies offer a "No Solicitation" program to screen out telemarketers. Tempting, yes, but not the right tone for would-be guests to hear. An alternative way to cut down on annoying calls and mailings is to make a toll-free call to 1-888-5-OPT-OUT. The Direct Marketing Association (<http://www.the-dma.org/consumers/consumerassistance.html>) can also help you reduce more of the same; the email opt-out is free; for telephone and regular mail, print out the on-line form and mail it in to avoid a \$5 processing fee.

Create an appealing, inviting, comprehensive and up-to-date web presence to decrease telephone costs while increasing telephone conversion rates. In other words, make it easy and pleasant for travelers, and you'll get the bookings; make it difficult, and your competitors will benefit.

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