

“A CASE FOR THE RETURN OF THE RECEPTIONIST”



Leslie Rose McDonald
President, Pathfinders CTS, Inc.

One of my fondest memories from a former company was the receptionist who worked there. Regardless of what was going on in my life or the mood I was in, her sincere “Good Morning!” helped me to put my worries aside and transition into my workday. I had always been taught to leave my troubles at the door when I went to work. Our receptionist helped me to do that.

Her role was varied, as she was assigned the challenging task of juggling being the official greeter of employees and guests, serving as internal “operator” for a busy automated phone system, keeping abreast of the daily corporate activities, and monitoring the whereabouts of key people awaiting important calls and visitors.

I would observe in appreciation this woman who exemplified grace under pressure. She could simultaneously attend to multiple phone lines, an arrogant and impatient salesperson, a lost driver stopping to ask for directions and a dozen out of state employees who showed up all at once for training. Hers was the lowest paid position in the company, yet she fulfilled her role with dignity, commitment and caring.

Now, fifteen years later, companies have helped to define their culture by either embracing or discarding the importance of the receptionist role. In the 90’s crunch to eliminate unnecessary positions to stay competitive, the receptionist job was one of the first to go. At first blush it would seem any easy decision to eliminate this “nice but unnecessary” lower level job, thus saving headcount and salary.

However, those who have eliminated this position in favor of total technology for building access and telephone systems may be missing an important point: Those who come to our companies or call into them by phone are *people* needing to reach other *people* to do business. This includes not only employees, but job candidates, customers or potential customers, vendors and others from the community. And, because doing business today and being competitive is so dependent on relationships and positive image, it might make sense to consider bringing back this important role.

Consider the impression that the following makes: A job candidate or potential customer has an appointment in your business. They are required to stand and wait in a glass hallway, with no human beings in sight, dialing up their contact person. This most impersonal “welcome” can be further alienating when they get their contact’s voicemail instead of the person they are trying to reach. Frustrating and inefficient, this scenario can literally and figuratively leave a person feeling “cold.”

Those who have chosen to maintain the receptionist position appear to understand and appreciate the value that this person brings to the organization. Many companies have aptly named or nicknamed this position “Director of First Impressions.” They understand the impact that this person can have on the organization which might be unnoticed or undervalued by others.

A receptionist is not technically needed today, that is true. We have computerized phone systems and can create secure entryways with key card or digital access. It is functionally efficient. Those taking the long view, however, realize that you cannot put a price on the value of taking care of people and the impact that it has on our businesses.