

# Reprinted from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THURSDAY, JUNE 9, 1994

© 1994 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

## ENTERPRISE

### Oh It's You, We Were Hoping You'd Call, Please Hold

#### Telephone Doctor Finds Teaching Electronic Civility Can Be Lucrative

By BARBARA MARSH

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
ST. LOUIS — Every day, millions of callers die a little on hold.

Nancy Friedman tries to stop the epidemic by prescribing a bit of common courtesy. Known professionally as "The Telephone Doctor," she advises anyone taking a business call to ask if the caller is able to hold. Many callers lack the time, she says. Those with time would rather be asked than ordered to "hold on," she notes.



Nancy Friedman

Mrs. Friedman, 53 years old, has built a thriving business by helping companies improve their employees' telephone skills. Her pitch is that bad phone manners kill sales. She offers cures for everything from telephone tag and the bureaucratic bounce to the cussing caller. She expects that her business will post sales of \$2.2 million this year, up from about \$1.9 million in 1993.

Mrs. Friedman is one of the nation's most successful phone-manner consultants, training-industry specialists say. The number of such consultants appears to be rising. In fact, actress Lily Tomlin released a phone-manner training video last year. Called "One Ringy Dingy," the video stars Ms. Tomlin's famous Ernestine character, a scatterbrained receptionist.

As the Telephone Doctor, Mrs. Friedman dons a white lab coat to lead light-hearted training seminars on phone etiquette. The former dinner-theater actress charges about \$4,000 for a two-hour program. Her character also stars in a series of 16 training videos, which she sells for \$3,990 a set. Among the titles: "How to Treat Every Caller as a Welcome Guest," "How to Handle the Irate, Angry, Rude, Unhappy and Sometimes Abrasive Caller" and "Voice Mail-Curse Or Cure?"

Mrs. Friedman insists anyone taking a customer's call should never say, "I don't know." She contends that it's more polite to say, "I'll find out." If a phone rings

repeatedly, the person answering should apologize on behalf of the company and then immediately offer to help.

Some Telephone Doctor clients say her advice produces results. AT&T Corp.'s credit-card unit has used her videos since it began four years ago. The unit says customers repeatedly give its telephone-service employees high ratings for phone friendliness, partly because of Mrs. Friedman's training. At cocktail parties, "I hear nice stories from people who've called here," says Robert Davis, a vice president of the unit. More than 2,000 AT&T workers have watched Mrs. Friedman's videos; she plans to give a refresher seminar there next week.

Telephone Doctor, which employs 24 people, is a unit of Weatherline Inc., a St. Louis family business run by Mrs. Friedman's husband Richard. Weatherline sells telephone weather-service reports to advertisers nationwide.

Telephone Doctor started by accident in 1983 after office workers at Mrs. Friedman's insurance broker treated her rudely on the phone. "Your people stink," she told the broker and threatened to cancel her policy. At his invitation, she spoke to the staff about phone manners for 20 angry minutes. Her points included: "When I call, I want to be greeted like you remember me, even if you don't! Let the guy on the other end of the line hear you smiling at him! And remember: 'please' and 'thank you' go a long way!"

Robert Fusie, then general manager and now publisher of the daily Quad City Times in Davenport, Iowa, heard about Mrs. Friedman's lecture. Mr. Fusie, a Weatherline customer, remembers that he was looking for a way to stress phone manners with his staff. Impressed by Weatherline's polite staff, he invited Mrs. Friedman to give a seminar to about 30 Quad City management employees.

Aided by her husband, Mrs. Friedman gave her spiel a humorous twist. Spoofing the lecture format, she donned fake glasses and a mustache and used a music stand as a portable podium. "While she is delivering information, you can't stare off into space. Her enthusiasm is infectious," says Mr. Fusie. He believes his employees' phone etiquette improved.

After her speech, a Quad City Times

editor dubbed Mrs. Friedman the "Telephone Doctor." She copyrighted the phrase and added the lab coat.

In certain quarters, however, Mrs. Friedman's advice falls on deaf ears. She admits that she has trouble persuading doctors, lawyers and engineers to mind their phone manners. And when an editor of another newspaper once asked her about helping his reporters, she replied, "Sir, I'm the Telephone Doctor. I heal the sick. I cannot raise the dead."

Mrs. Friedman also hasn't made much of a dent on young people's phone etiquette. In 1988, the Friedmans produced an award-winning video, "Telephone Tips for Kids," starring puppets who visit the Telephone Doctor to cure their bad phone manners. But the video never sold well. The couple says they had a \$50,000 loss on the venture. The Friedmans now plan to stick with the business market.

Among other tips, Mrs. Friedman tells companies that treating even wrong numbers well can pay off. She recalls how St. Louis executive John D. Ryan once mistakenly called Telephone Doctor in search of mechanical service for his telephone. "My ringer doesn't work," he told her. Mrs. Friedman pleasantly noted that her company didn't fix phones and proceeded to plug her services instead.

Mr. Ryan, now retired, recalls, "I was impressed by the way she talked to me on the phone." She ended up selling him several videotapes.

Much of Mrs. Friedman's phone advice seems corny, even a bit forced. She reminds people to smile before they answer the phone. She says that prevents "emotional leakage," taking personal frustrations out on a caller. She even recommends that sales and customer-service people keep a mirror on their desks to check their expressions. While some people cringe at such gushy insincerity, she asserts, "A phony smile is better than a real frown."

She also says it's never all right to hang up on someone. But for the foulmouthed caller, she does offer a "Swear Stopper" technique. Take control of the conversation, she says, by interrupting the caller with a pleasant, helpful voice. Then say, "Excuse me. I can handle your problem. That's no problem. I cannot handle your abusive language."