

Holland Cooke **Tips for Call Screeners**

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Prepping callers before they go to the host on-air is VERY important. *Not* doing so is where lots of shows drop the ball on the one-yard line. In the same way that contestants on TV game shows seem pumped, your callers should sound like they know the host, are thrilled to be on-air, and come quickly to their point.

BEFORE the call goes to the host, producers should:

- Qualify the caller. Not everyone who calls should get on-air. If the caller's point is vague or the caller rambles making his/her point, the producer should *pre-interview* the caller.
 - Rehearse the on-air conversation off-air before the caller goes on-air. Help the caller boil-it-down to an opening statement that communicates his/her point succinctly.
 - If the caller can't do so, politely pass. Put the caller on hold for 10 seconds, then come back on the line and apologize that "TED'S GOT A COUPLE OTHER CALLS LINED-UP, AND WE DON'T WANT YOU TO WAIT ON-HOLD IF WE'RE NOT SURE HE'LL BE ABLE TO SQUEEZE YOU IN."
- When you have a caller you *will* put through:
 - Tell the caller that, when he/she gets on-air: "SPEAK LOUDLY AND CLEARLY, AND COME RIGHT TO YOUR POINT."
 - Suggest that "IF YOU ENJOY TED'S SHOW, TELL HIM. HE'LL BE VERY FLATTERED TO HEAR THAT YOU DO."
 - Corny as this sounds, invite the caller to "ASK IF YOU CAN SAY HELLO TO SOMEONE. IF THERE'S NOBODY IN PARTICULAR, SAY HELLO TO EVERYONE IN [name of caller's town]." The person the caller is saying hello to will hear about it from *everyone*. And just saying hello "TO EVERYONE IN SPRINGFIELD" will do precisely that. Hundreds of Arbitron diaries go to Springfield.
- If the topic at hand is an issue, feed the host callers in alternating order of viewpoint. Example: Alternate Pro-Life and Pro-Choice callers. Doing so will:
 - Make your show sound balanced.
 - Make the show more engaging.
 - Provoke more callers.
- Seek also to alternate caller *genders* male/female, and *ages* younger-sounding-caller/older-sounding-caller.
- And if you're a national show, seek a diversity of regional accents and caller locations, even to the point of calling-back opportune callers if there are a couple other callers already lined-up.
- Also for issue-oriented discussions: Your show needs "sparks." Talk radio thrives on conflict and listener interactivity. Favor callers who disagree with the host and each other.
- UNLESS a caller is real good, move through callers quickly. Many listeners think that – while a caller is talking on-air – *it's that other person's turn*, and the line will be busy.
- Air more first-time callers. New voices bring new characters and new perspectives that keep your show fresh and interesting.
 - ASK for first-time callers ("IF YOU'VE NEVER CALLED A TALK SHOW BEFORE, WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU").
 - Many hosts do first-time-caller-only segments, or days (i.e., "First-Timer Fridays, when the host promises that "FIRST-TIME CALLERS MOVE TO THE HEAD OF THE LINE").

- If the caller is a contestant, tell him/her:
 - "SOUND EXCITED TO PLAY."
 - "GUESS EVEN IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER."

Hosts: Techniques to make the phones ring faster:

- Don't say goodbye to callers. Just keep saying hello to NEW callers, as though more and more people were entering the room. Let your screener thank them OFF-air.
- Don't allude to callers waiting on hold.
 - Well-intentioned host comments such as "FRED FROM OMAHA, WE'LL GET TO YOU NEXT" send listeners the wrong message: that they'll have to wait on Hold. Who's got time for that?
 - This may seem like a nuance on *our* side of the microphone, but it's more apparent *out there*. Yes, it is a nice touch to tell callers they'll be coming up soon, or thank them for holding. Just have the screener do so *off-air*, just before/after we put the callers on-air.