

Are You a Hotline HOTHEAD?

How to Call Customer Service

compiled by Marie S. Paxson

You have a customer service issue that you need to resolve by calling the company's 800 number. This has been difficult for you in the past, as you struggle to regulate your emotions. Your friends and family may refer to you as "reactive" or possibly even a "hothead."

You are not alone. And now you have to do your least favorite thing.

What do you do—fifteen minutes of yoga breathing in advance? Punch a pillow? Get someone else to make the call on your behalf?

COMEDIANS JOKE ABOUT IT. Sitcoms show scenes of endless menu options when people try to resolve a customer service issue by calling an 800 number. But for most of us, our sense of humor evaporates before we even place the call. The hold music static, the endless verification questions, and service reps who can't (won't?) diverge from their script. Ugh!

At CHADD's *Attention* magazine, we realize that one of the effects of COVID-19 could mean you must call banks, lenders, insurers, and others with your customer service inquiries and requests. And we know that those who struggle with emotional regulation could find this even more difficult.

So we consulted our favorite group of experts—the ADHD community—for their perspectives and guidance on what you can do before, during, and after your call.

Here are the responses we received, lightly edited for clarity and length. We hope you find these tips and suggestions helpful. Let us know if you have a favorite method for dealing with customer service reps. This is a universal experience and we'd love to hear from you.

BEFORE YOU CALL

- Try to resolve the issue via email.
- Write down what you want to ask.
- You can greatly reduce the waiting frustration when you make note of how long the wait is.
- If you're looking for help with a product, have it in front of you.
- Review policy/warranty rules ahead of the call so you know what is actually covered and what your rights are.
- Look online for "gethuman" and the vendor (search term would be "GetHuman Bank of America") and the correct 80 number should be displayed. Note that GetHuman is a fee-for-service company that offers to make customer service calls and requests on your behalf. Read their reviews carefully before deciding if this is an option for you. (As of this writing, the reviews were very mixed.)
- Make the call in a quiet space with lots of room to pace. Unless my call involves sharing personal medical or



financial details, I make these calls from a coffee shop. I'm less likely to blow a gasket in a public place. If I need to speak in a loud voice because the rep can't hear me, I take the call on the shop's sidewalk or outdoor table. I don't want to display sarcasm or seem hostile in front of others. For calls where I would give out PINs or identity information, I call from my car in a busy retail parking lot. Same reason; I don't want to be seen as someone making wild, angry gestures in public. This process keeps me focused on finding a solution.

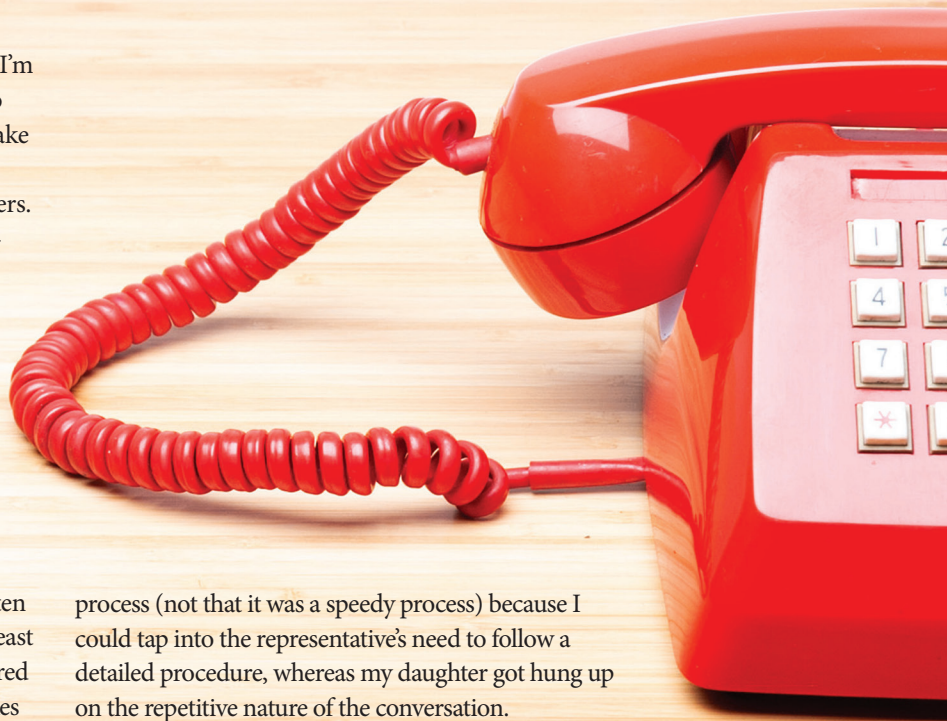
- Have a stress ball or grip tool at the ready.
- Rehearse with someone beforehand examples of how you will remain in control during the call. Then, when you're ready, make the call.
- Allot enough time for the call. I used to think "I have ten minutes; I'll call my insurance provider." Now I allot at least twenty to thirty minutes. This makes me feel less pressured when my call runs longer than I anticipated, which makes me less impatient with the customer service rep.

Remembering that my goal is to get help, not make the customer service rep angry. I would try to get in the present moment and take a few breaths. Not personalizing what may happen helps.

My daughter is less patient than me. So when she needed to call her university to straighten out a transcript error, she included me using the conference call feature on her smartphone. She told the rep that I was on the line and was authorized to speak about this matter. When she would become annoyed with some of the roadblocks, I would clarify or restate her remarks in softer language. This sped up the

process (not that it was a speedy process) because I could tap into the representative's need to follow a detailed procedure, whereas my daughter got hung up on the repetitive nature of the conversation.

- If I need to make a call that is emotionally difficult on top of the hassle (requesting my dad's death certificate comes to mind), then I plan a reward for myself after I've completed it. Nothing like a little treat to acknowledge that I just accomplished something difficult.
- Get creative: Barter or exchange tasks with a friend. If you want her to hop on the line when you dispute a health insurance bill, then offer to virtually accompany her on a customer service call that she is dreading. Or run an errand or perform a task in exchange for her assistance in navigating a complicated issue.



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Most of the time they are very nice and helpful.

DURING YOUR CALL

- Chew gum while on the call (quietly, of course). The chewing action absorbs some of my restless energy.
- I know I can get upset on these calls, so I do some preventive work when I first get on the call. I start the call by saying something like, "I know that you're not the one that caused this problem, so please don't take my frustration personally." It helps me to remember that, and I think it also helps the customer service person to work with me.
- The hold button is your friend. Especially when you're triggered.

- Don't be adversarial; put yourself in the rep's shoes—they are a person, too.

I try to see the person on the other line as a human being who is trying to earn a living (probably with low wages) to support herself or her family. Personalizing the customer rep helps.

- Forgive the representative for not being allowed to think.

- Start the call, talk to the person, and when I start to react, pass the phone onto my significant other.

Have my significant other nearby and pass the phone to them if I become too agitated to keep talking to the customer service person.

- Give the customer service representative permission stop reading the script.
- Seek a trusted person who is skilled at conversations such as these to make the call next to you, and use this as a skill-building experience.
- A little politeness goes a long way. It's another human on the other side of the call. Most of the time they are very nice and helpful. It's okay to talk to strangers.
- In trying to stay calm, I would not feed into the possible indifference of the rep, who probably has a given script and no authority to cause changes. I like the phrase "With all due respect..." to state something that I know will put down the other person and make the comment brief. If all else fails, I ask to [speak to] a supervisor.



- Assume good faith on the other end and if you get someone irritating, ask for the manager.
- I ask to speak to a supervisor if I am not getting what I need from the person. And I ask as nicely as possible. I acknowledge that the rep is well-meaning, but [state] that I need to speak to a decision-maker.
- Always ask the person's name before hanging up and use it to say thank you and write it down in case you forgot it already: "Laura, thank you for your assistance."
- As tempting as it is to react, watch your body language and any angry internal thoughts. While the rep can't see your eye rolls or hand gestures over the phone—and you may think you are just venting—you could actually be feeding your anger and making yourself more upset, instead of less upset. Everyone is different. So, quietly banging your head on your desk might feel justified, but it might not be in your best interest.

AFTER YOU CALL

If the call was tortuous, it really helps me to tell someone else about it. Just to get it off my chest. In most cases, there were some aspects that were so ridiculous I just have to commiserate with a friend or colleague.

If the call was either very smooth or very unsatisfying, then I take the survey that is offered at the end.

I learned this at a business workshop and I was shocked, but I borrowed the idea. Most American businesses use a popular software program. Apparently their customer service reps are not very knowledgeable about their product. So workshop attendees were advised "call their hotline three times. Then take the answer you like best." So if I'm trying to resolve an error message or defective product I call 800 numbers three times to see if I get uniform answers before trying to correct the problem.

We hope you find these tips and suggestions helpful. Let us know if you have a favorite method for dealing with customer service reps. This is a universal experience and we'd love to hear from you. 🗣️

Marie S. Paxson has spent years as an advocate for people living with ADHD—as a parent, past president of CHADD, a local chapter leader, and as former chair and a current member of Attention's editorial advisory board. She has been instrumental in CHADD's work to influence federal policy, even testifying at a US Department of Education hearing on special education law. Fluent in the findings of science and research, she also understands the practical day-to-day issues facing those affected by ADHD. She is certified in mental health first aid.