



Speech to the Telephone Pioneers of America
October 1944

Page, A. W. (1944, October 27). Talk. Speech presented at the Edward J. Hall Chapter of the Telephone Pioneers of America, New York, NY.

Summary

Page recaps circumstances surrounding the depression and the war. He highlights the value of good customer service during his nearly 21-year journey in the Bell System. He looks forward to more prosperous and busy times with the company.

Throughout World War II, Bell Systems leveraged the good corporate reputation it built during the depression and World War I. The company's prior performance helped instill customer trust that resulted in customers' tolerating and believing the company's words when the company indicated that delays in toll calls were indeed caused by the war. Page explains that the benefits of treating customers with courtesy, kind words, and helpfulness are limitless, especially when individuals are under pressure. When there were not enough telephone services (circuits or switchboards) in military camps and naval stations, the friendliness of managers and operators positively influenced perceptions of the company.

Key topics

Reputation
Customer Service

Page Principles

Tell the truth
Prove it with action
Manage for tomorrow
Remain calm, patient and good-humored
Realize a company's true character is expressed by its people

Talk

Edward J. Hall Chapter of Telephone Pioneers of America
New York, NY
October 27, 1944

TALK

As you know I am not old enough in the Bell System to be a Pioneer. I suppose that when Mr. Campbell asked me to speak he was paying tribute to the Youth Movement.

As a matter of fact, in the normal course of events I don't expect I ever will be a Pioneer. This is not because I do not expect to reach my twenty-first year in the Bell System, but because I have little expectation of seeing any normal course of events.

I came into this business in the abnormal boom of the late twenties. Then came the abnormal depression. Then came the abnormal prolongation of the depression and then came the abnormalities of the prelude to war. Now we are in the abnormal period of war. If half the postwar plans that are being planned are even half tried we are going to have a real abnormal time after the war.

I have been told in the newspapers, magazines, by pamphlet and book, and over the radio that those evil boom times of the twenties were the cause of all the troubles we have had since. I have heard people calling for all manner of sacrifices so that we shall never see their like again. I confess to being something of a Philistine. While they were with us, I rather liked the twenties.

There was a lot going on. Wages were going up. Rates were going down. We were opening services to all kinds of places in Europe. There were many new jobs, many new projects, and lots of people got raises in salaries. Everybody was cheery and confident. And it was customary for people to actually get the larger part of their pay.

Then came the world's longest depression. Since that time what goes on reminds me of Uncle Elijah's cotton crop.

He and his wife, Aunt Frances, lived in a small cabin and worked cotton on a small farm. One fall Uncle Elijah took his two bales to the gin. The gin was run by the same man who ran the country store. Two bales was a good crop and the price for once was up to 10 cents a pound. Elijah went off in gay spirits. He came back a little sobered.

"What did you git?" said Aunt Frances.

"A hundred an' nine dollars fo' de cotton an' anudder eighteen dollars fo' de seed."

"Bless yo' soul, lemme see de money."

"'Bout dat money, Frances, de ducks got it."

"How yo' mean de ducks got it?"

"Well, Mr. Mckeithen he sez, 'Elijah, dat's good cotton an' what's mo' it's a good price, cotton an' seed \$127.' An' den he opens up a book he had an' he commences -

"Deduct fo' dollars and fifty cents fo' calico bought by Frances. Deduct three dollars and seventy cents for a collar fo' de mule. Deduct six dollars and seventeen cents fo' sundries.'

"Deduct dis, deduct dat, detuct tudder. And when he gits done deducts he got de whole business and dis hyer sunbonnet what I brung yo' is gwiner come outer nex' year's crop."

Ever since the depression started, deducts have been active around here.

While the war is on and until the infantry gets to Berlin and Tokyo nothing matters much but getting on with the war.

And we must get it clear, too, that the war isn't done until it is done. The provisional estimate on winning the war may be clear, but the war isn't over until it is carried out. I am an optimist about our fighting forces, but we have to soberly remember that we are not in Berlin yet and in spite of the amazing feats of our Navy we have not yet gotten back where we were the day before Pearl Harbor. Also we haven't yet gotten to a place where we can reach the main Jap army, which is in China and in Japan.

But when the war is done, if we have to be abnormal, I am in favor of being abnormally busy, abnormally prosperous, abnormally cheerful. I am in favor of lots of jobs, lots of promotions and having a fair part of the pay stick to the fellow that earned it. What is more I am young enough and optimistic enough to think that something like this may come to pass.

If it does, we in the Bell System are going to have to do something about it.

In the first place, we have got to get a lot of money. You can't put in a million or more telephones one year after another without money and lots of it. Yet we'll have to do that and more if we are going to catch up with the held orders and keep up with a prosperous America. A lot of switchboards and toll lines go with those telephones. And then there are coaxial cables and radio relay circuits for telephones and television. And by the time we get well started with these things the Laboratories are likely to have schemes for changing over one area after another to intercity dialing. Beyond that they will be recommending things we don't even have a name for now. If you just have the money to put stuff in they will invent it for you, for they are the smartest and busiest people you ever saw. When they quit turning out one amazing and fantastic apparatus after another for killing Germans and Japs, and get back in their telephone stride, it is going to keep a lot of people busy making and installing and operating the things they think up.

Where are we going to get the money to do all this?

There is just one place to get it—out of the biggest pool of money in the world, the savings of the people of the United States. There are 660,000 who have their money in our business now. These and others like them will put in all we need - if they believe that we will keep it safe and pay for it fairly.

You don't convince them that we'll play fair with them by promises. They judge by performance. They have believed in us because we performed. They have had a safe investment on which they have had a fair return—some 6-3/4% on the amount of the money in the business. That is the basis of their belief. That is the basis for getting the money we need to keep busy and effective in the future. That is the basis on which we can have the new things, which will make service better and more economical for the public.

Those new things are economical. They are labor savings. With them men and women accomplish more than they did before and the public gets better and cheaper service.

And the Irish of it is that labor-saving devices in the Bell System have always called for more labor not less, for the devices make the business grow. There are more

operators now than when we were all manual, and more linemen now that we have cable than there were when all lines were open wire lines, and more office workers now than there were before we had all manner of office machines.

About all we have to do is to be sure we can get the money from the public pool. If that is done we are headed for an abnormally good time. I don't know about you, but I can take quite a lot of it.

So much for the material side of this business.

There is another side.

This isn't just a business.

The Bell System isn't just a lot of companies.

To most of us it is our life.

It is not only what we live by – it is how we live. What the Bell System does is the measure of the kind of folks we are.

The Bell System has a good reputation. That is a comfortable thing to live with.

It is an inward satisfaction to feel that you belong to a good team—a worthwhile enterprise, well conducted. And if the casual acquaintances, the neighbors, the newspapers and the world in general, speak well of your outfit it is more fun talking about the business than if it has a bad name. It gives a better flavor to a home when the youngsters come in with compliments for the place you work in than if they come in with questions about its character or accomplishments.

We have a good reputation now. We are using it. When we tell the public that it is because of the war they can't have telephones and they must expect delay on toll calls, they believe us. That belief is based on past performance. Here we are getting fewer complaints for poorer service than we ever got for the best service. That is the public's war tolerance mixed with faith in us. But it is also something else besides that. I want to read you a letter that recently came into the Los Angeles office.

September 19, 1944

Southern California Telephone Company
Los Angeles, California

Dear Sirs,

Yesterday, I called at your office in regard to equipment for amplifying sound on my telephone, as I am hard of hearing.

It was an unforgettable experience; your office seemed so restful and quiet, as compared to the streets and stores.

The courteous manner in which we were received, whether for a complaint or for some extra service, and escorted to our chair, and then to the desk where we were greeted with a smile.

While waiting my turn, resting in that very comfortable chair and quiet atmosphere, it seemed as if we were in another world and would expect to hear a choir or a symphony, such as we hear every Monday evening on the Telephone Hour.

In these days of ceiling prices, restrictions and rationing; there is one thing that has no limit and that is courtesy, as exemplified by my visit yesterday, and the experience was so unusual and pleasant that I cannot let the opportunity pass by for saying; Thank You.

Very truly yours,
(Signed) Arthur W. Redfern

You notice the phrase “There is one thing that has no limit and that is courtesy.” Kind words and helpfulness. You can’t just put these things on like an overcoat. They have to be natural. And what is more they don’t amount to very much unless they are hitched to competence. Most people are kindly by nature. But a lot of them haven’t the character or training to be competently courteous under pressure or in adverse circumstances.

I don’t know whether you have all thought about our experiences in the camps and naval stations. The boys wanted to call home. They generally wanted to call about the same time. It couldn’t be done. We couldn’t furnish the circuits or the switchboards. And yet everywhere you go the soldiers and sailors have a good word for the telephone companies. True we didn’t have facilities, but we did have managers and operators. And the managers and operators were friendly people with a know-how to make their friendliness effective. They turned a liability into an asset. And they have a good time doing it. There is fun pitching when you’ve got stuff on the ball.

We’ve got this held order liability with us in good measure. About the only way to make it an asset that I know of is by all hands showing what kind of people Bell System folks are. And it isn’t going to be so easy, for the pressure will last quite a while and increase. We’ve got the surface of it now. We’ll be getting the body of it later. It makes me think of what one of the soldiers of the 92d Division said to his buddy on the way to North Africa.

They were looking out on the unceasing rolling of the limitless sea. Nothing in sight but water. Finally one turned to the other and said, “Amos, that’s a powerful lot of water. Jes’ look out there. That’s a powerful lot of water – and what’s mo’ that’s jes’ the top of it.”

There will be quite a lot of seething down below and the public sometimes loses tolerance fast. I am often reminded of a small politician in North Carolina who had had some experience with the changing moods of the public. He came back quite a hero after the last war and received a great welcome. There were many flowery speeches, none of which mentioned certain hard things that had been said of him on previous occasions. As he rose to reply he remarked rather whimsically that he greatly appreciated the kind

words of the neighbors, but he still remembered that on even a tall man it was only eighteen inches from a slap on the back to a kick in the pants.

The public mood can turn quickly. The tolerance bred of war may fade rapidly when the fighting is over, but neither impatience nor irritation can make much headway against a solid front of competent courtesy. I am not worried about the public's changes of mood if there is no deterioration in our performance. The next couple of years is the time that will show the neighbors what kind of people we are. And that performance will affect quite a lot what kind of a life we lead afterward.

A great philosopher of my acquaintance is engaged in a deep speculation as to the origin, development and cure of that curious human characteristic which he calls "post-prandial persecution." Why is it that people who have eaten well and comfortably should call down upon themselves a shower of words? His researches are not finished. There is no answer apparent to the problem. It is only because of long habit that I have spent twenty minutes of your time telling you things you already know, and telling them in ten times as many words as need be.

That this last statement is true I will prove to you by giving you the whole speech in two sentences.

First, you can hire a lot of people if you have treated the American people well so they will give you the money to do it with.

Second, a soft answer turneth away wrath and character shows best when the going is rough.