

# Keep those calls and letters coming



Bernie Yorke (left) and Don Gullett both handle a large volume of public telephone calls at the Climatological Information Unit (CCAS) at AES Downsview. Any queries they are unable to answer, they quickly refer to other government offices.

Nine million customers a year can't be wrong, they call AES for weather information. Scores of other people with questions on every imaginable subject, from garbage collections to UFOs do not know who to call to obtain answers to their queries, so inevitably they turn to AES.

AES offices dot the country from St. John's, Nfld., to Victoria, B.C., and often spell Government to thousands of local residents who do not differentiate too clearly between the various levels.

You can hardly blame people for not being able to decide which problems fall under which jurisdiction, municipal, provincial or federal. Just accept the fact that you will receive many calls on matters that do not directly concern AES, and these could include such "distant" matters as an eclipse of the sun, a falling skylab or a volcanic eruption. This will involve some polite listening, quick thinking and referral of callers as far as humanly possible to the right source.

Of course this is not as simple as it sounds. AES staff often seek guidance on how to handle such calls, find needed resource material or refer questions to the right authorities. All this so affects our reputation, it seems a good idea to pass on some tips.

## Creating a good impression

It is easier said than done, but remember to be patient and pleasant. If you give the caller your total attention, and don't sound

bored or annoyed, you create good will and avoid offending people who may be making their first and only call to Environment Canada. The way a call is handled will make a lasting impression, good or bad. Also don't forget every Canadian has a right to deal with the government in English or French.

Since the majority of people contacting AES have problems they want solved, it is wise to put callers on the road to a solution by providing information directly, or by referring them to an expert or appropriate agency. Every person with an enquiry has a right to such treatment, even if the call seems frivolous.

People who call with questions concerning Environment Canada could be offered a choice of either phoning the referral directly or of having this person phone them back. If the caller chooses the second, you should arrange the call. Your offer is important since some people phone AES offices because they cannot afford to call Ottawa or other distant centres. Of course this cannot be done in offices outside the government's intercity phone system.

When your referral is to an outside agency, you should ask the caller to phone or write directly.

The ideal type of referral includes the agency's name, a telephone number, and the name of an expert. Telling someone that the matter is not our concern and to try elsewhere, creates the wrong impres-

sion. Suggesting an alternative shows concern. To handle questions well and provide good referrals requires planning ahead and preparing answers to the most common queries. Compiling a list of phone numbers and obtaining some handy reference material is a good start.

## Telephone style

Deciding the style you will use to answer the phone needs some thought. It is best to say "Environment Canada" or the name of your unit, and add your name, e.g. "Environment Canada, Miss Roy speaking." If answering for someone else, the style goes something like, "Environment Canada, Mr. Richard's office, Miss Roy speaking."

An important point about recording a message on a codaphone is to make it clear that the phone rings through to a human at the end of the announcement. Some people hang up because they do not want a recorded weather report. They have a complaint, or require some detailed information, and are angry because they cannot get through.

If you are busy when a call arrives, why don't you take the telephone number and phone back as soon as possible. Letting people know when you will call shows courtesy and prevents you having to make repeat calls.



Not all letters received at AES offices are as precise or as neatly penned as the sample reproduced here. But whatever their quality, all public communications should be dealt with as promptly and as courteously as humanly possible.

If a person is asked for by name, but happens to be absent, it is better to say he is away from his desk or on leave, or out on business, rather than explaining he is sick or on his coffee break.

If the person requested is tied up for only a minute, give the caller the choice of being called back or being put on hold. A hold decision requires you to come back on the line every 30 seconds and tell the caller he has not been forgotten. Try to avoid asking the caller whether he can hold, then clicking the hold button before he has had time to answer. It is even worse if he is calling long distance. When people phone in from out of town, it's wiser to call them back personally, or offer an explanation if that's impossible.

Take some time to familiarize yourself with office telephone equipment. This way you will run less risk of cutting someone off inadvertently, and losing a friend for life.

Then there's the question of respecting anonymity, precious to people who feel rather shy about calling a government office. Of course you must ask callers to identify themselves when you need their address to send them publications, but screening calls to no purpose is wrong. If you must know who is on the line, say "May I say who's calling" rather than "What is your name?"

When taking addresses, it's a good idea to obtain the phone number so that if there is a delay in shipment, you can phone to tell them of the hold up.

After a caller has explained what he wants, it pays off to repeat the request back to him. Why negate all your good intentions, when a little double checking could prevent mistakes?

Be careful not to let answers to questions contain information you are uncertain about. Some calls may be from people collecting evidence for arguments against neighbors or other agencies, so it's important to offer facts, not speculation.

### Letters and walk-in requests

Ninety percent of all AES enquiries arrive by telephone so rightly we talk about this method of enquiry at great length, but the same degree of courtesy and common sense applies to letters and walk-in requests. Answering letters promptly and in a personalized manner cannot fail to create a good impression.

If your receptionist knows of your upcoming appointments, she can greet the visitor by saying, "Hello Mrs. Martin, Mr. Richard is expecting you." If the meeting is unavoidably delayed, Mrs. Martin should be told how long she has to wait. It goes without saying that reception areas should be neat and display a selection of AES and Environment Canada publications.

### A final word

The above advice is just that — advice. In reality each caller and each situation is different, so that you will often rely on common sense to provide the answers you need. All we ask is that you bring credit to the department.

### Handy telephone numbers

Telephone numbers to give a caller when referring him to another agency, vary from region to region. The following is a list of

possible enquiry subjects with the appropriate federal information numbers in Ottawa marked beside them.

It is hoped these will start you off in your research and help you obtain the right information either locally or from the national sources. It is important that each office generates a corresponding local list so that callers in a region can, wherever possible, be referred to local sources. If you can suggest any new categories to be added, we would appreciate it.

One highly recommended source is *An index to Government of Canada programs and services available to the public in Canada*. (DSS catalogue No. CPI4/1979, but now being revised). Last listed price was \$17.50

TOPIC	FEDERAL AGENCY	NATIONAL OR CENTRAL TELEPHONE NUMBER	
Environmental matters			
general information	Environment Canada other than AES	Hull	997-6555
climatic data	Canadian Climate Centre	Toronto	667-4614
parks	Parks Canada (pubs. & information)	Hull	997-0088
wildlife*	Canadian Wildlife Service (pubs)	Hull	997-1095
forestry*	Canadian Forestry Service (pubs)	Hull	997-2800
land*	Lands Directorate (pubs)	Hull	997-2800
inland waters*	Inland Waters (pubs)	Hull	997-2601
environmental protection*	EPS general (pubs)	Hull	997-2800
air pollution*	EPS air pollution directorate	Hull	997-0284
car exhausts*	EPS air pollution technology (pubs)	Ottawa	998-9592
water pollution*	EPS water pollution control (pubs)	Hull	997-1220
recycling projects*	EPS	Hull	997-3212
Radiation health hazards	Health & Welfare Canada	Ottawa	998-3624
Consumer protection	Consumer & Corporate Affairs	Ottawa	997-4210
Earthquakes	Energy Mines and Resources	Ottawa	995-5558
Energy conservation	Energy Mines and Resources	1 800	267-9563
Furnace conversion grants	Energy Mines and Resources	1 800	267-9563
Insulation grants	CHIP	Montreal	341-1511
Fisheries matters	Fisheries and Oceans Canada	Ottawa	995-2041
Maps	Canada Map Office (EMR)	Ottawa	998-3865
Public service employment	Public Service Commission	Ottawa	966-5010
Sunrise, sunset times & solar angles	National Research Council	Ottawa	966-9345