



APEX ENGLISH · A2 BUSINESS

Unit A2-7A

First contact: how to open a customer call well

The customer conversation

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First contact: how to open a customer call well

The customer conversation · A2+/B1 · 60–70 min · Business English



"The first 30 seconds decide the next 30 minutes."

— Customer service rule

Objectives

- Open a customer conversation professionally: greet, identify the need, set expectations.
- Use present continuous vs present simple to describe what your company usually does versus what's happening this quarter.
- Discuss customer-service culture, defending choices with reasons and examples.

Class Book

Warm-up · Your last customer call

Solo · about you · 4 min

Think for 60 seconds before answering out loud.

- What did you say in the first 10 seconds of your last customer call?
- Was the customer more relaxed or more tense at the end than at the start?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

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- If you could redo that opening, what would you change?
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Lead-in · Put the first minute in order

Ordering · put the steps in a sensible order · 6 min

These six moves usually happen in the first minute of a good customer call. Put them in the order YOU think works best. Then compare with a partner.

Follow-up: Which step do you always skip in your own calls? What does it cost you when you skip it?

Reading · The first 30 seconds

10 min

There is a small piece of research most customer-service leaders quietly agree with: in almost every call, the tone for the entire conversation is set in the first thirty seconds. Not by the customer — by the agent. The words are almost incidental; what matters is whether the customer, in those first seconds, feels seen or feels processed.

The mechanics of a good opening are unglamorous. You greet the person by name — using their surname unless they've told you otherwise. You state your own name and role clearly, so they know exactly who they are speaking to. You confirm you have the right person, which is both a compliance step and a subtle signal of care. And then, crucially, you don't rush. You ask an open question — 'How can I help today?' — and you listen to the whole answer before you speak, even if you already know what the problem is.

The reason this is harder than it sounds is that agents under pressure tend to compress the opening to save time. They cut the greeting, skip the introduction, and jump straight to the solution. It feels efficient. It isn't. Customers who feel processed rather than heard raise more complaints, extend the call with clarifying questions, and are far more likely to escalate. The paradox of customer service is that the fastest calls are usually the ones that started slowly, on purpose.

Comprehension check

1. The main argument of the text is that...

- ☐ A. long calls are always better than short ones.
- ☐ B. the quality of the first 30 seconds shapes the whole call.
- ☐ C. customers care most about a friendly voice.
- ☐ D. compliance is more important than empathy.

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2. According to the text, why do agents compress the opening?

- ☐ A. Because they don't know what to say.
- ☐ B. Because they're trying to save time under pressure.
- ☐ C. Because managers tell them to.
- ☐ D. Because customers ask them to.

3. The 'paradox' mentioned in the last paragraph is that...

- ☐ A. polite calls are shorter than rude ones.
- ☐ B. the fastest calls tend to start with a deliberately slow opening.
- ☐ C. agents talk more than customers.
- ☐ D. customers prefer being processed.

4. The tone of the text is best described as...

- ☐ A. hostile and critical.
- ☐ B. purely descriptive.
- ☐ C. analytical with practical advice.
- ☐ D. sales-oriented.

Reading reflection · discursive writing (100–130 words)

Write 100–130 words responding to the prompt. Use at least ONE example from your own workplace.

1. The article claims that 'the fastest calls are usually the ones that started slowly, on purpose.' In your industry, is this realistic, or do KPIs force agents to compress the opening? What could you keep or change?

Vocabulary · Opening & signposting

10 min

Roles

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Term	Meaning
How can I help today?	standard open question
May I ask who I'm speaking to?	polite way to confirm the caller
Bear with me for a moment	ask the customer to wait briefly
signpost	tell the customer what will happen next
on hold	waiting with the line still connected
walk you through	explain step by step

Smalltalk

Term	Meaning
Just to confirm...	check you understood correctly
If I've understood correctly...	paraphrase before acting
Let me check that for you	buy time to look something up
I'll follow up in writing	send a written recap after the call
Is there anything else I can help you with?	close-the-call question
in the meantime	while something else happens

Practice

Complete each sentence with ONE word or phrase from the lists above.

1. Good morning — thank you for calling Solari. How can I ___ today?
2. I'll put you on ___ for about a minute while I check that.
3. Just to ___, you want us to reissue the invoice with the new VAT number, correct?
4. I'll ___ you through the process step by step.
5. Bear with me for a ___ — I'm looking at your account now.
6. Is there ___ else I can help you with today?

Collocations · sound more natural

Match each verb with the most natural completion.

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Term	Meaning
handle	a call
put someone	on hold
walk through	the details
raise	a ticket
escalate	a case
follow up	in writing

Odd one out · register

One option is too informal or too abrupt for a professional call.

1. 'How can I help you today?' / 'What do you want?' / 'How may I assist you?' / 'Tell me what's the matter.'

- ☐ **A.** 'How can I help you today?'
- ☐ **B.** 'What do you want?'
- ☐ **C.** 'How may I assist you?'
- ☐ **D.** 'Tell me what's the matter.'

2. 'Bear with me one moment.' / 'Just to check something.' / 'Wait.' / 'Let me check that for you.'

- ☐ **A.** 'Bear with me one moment.'
- ☐ **B.** 'Just to check something.'
- ☐ **C.** 'Wait.'
- ☐ **D.** 'Let me check that for you.'

3. 'I'll follow up in writing.' / 'I'll send email.' / 'I'll drop you a quick email to confirm.' / 'I'll follow up by email today.'

- ☐ **A.** 'I'll follow up in writing.'
- ☐ **B.** 'I'll send email.'
- ☐ **C.** 'I'll drop you a quick email to confirm.'
- ☐ **D.** 'I'll follow up by email today.'

Grammar · Present simple vs present continuous in customer talk

14 min

1. Present simple — permanent / routine / policy

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

We offer 24-hour support. · Our customer team handles all technical issues. · Refunds usually take 5 working days. Use this for what your company always does or how things normally work.

2. Present continuous — right now / this period / temporary

I'm looking at your account now. · We're currently running a campaign for new users. · This month we're piloting a new callback system. Use this for what's happening at this moment, or a temporary situation.

3. Common mix in one sentence

'Normally we ship in 48 hours, but this week we're experiencing delays because of the strike.' — one general fact + one temporary situation, joined with 'but'.

4. Stative verbs stay simple

Verbs of state (know, understand, mean, need, have = possess) usually stay in the simple form even 'right now': 'I understand your frustration' — NOT 'I am understanding'.

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Exercise A — Choose the right form

Present simple or present continuous?

1. Normally we ___ (reply) within one working day.

2. I'm sorry — we ___ (currently experience) higher call volumes than usual.

3. I ___ (understand) exactly what you mean, and I ___ (look) at it right now.

4. Our team ___ (handle) about 200 tickets a day.

5. This week we ___ (pilot) a new callback system, so wait times may be shorter than usual.

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Exercise B — Rewrite for a customer

Same message, appropriate register.

1. We are always shipping in 48 hours.

2. I am understanding your problem.

3. Right now I look at your account.

4. This month we run a promotion on new subscriptions.

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Exercise C — Fix the mistake

Each sentence has ONE mistake. Rewrite it correctly.

1. I am agreeing with you completely.

2. We currently offering a 20% discount this week.

3. Normally the invoice arrives at Friday.

4. Right now I check with the warehouse.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

Exercise D — Discursive writing (80-100 words)

Write a short paragraph using **AT LEAST 3** present-simple verbs (routine) and 3 present-continuous verbs (this week / right now).

1. Describe how customer service normally works in your company AND one thing that is different this week or this month (a campaign, a delay, a pilot, a peak season).

Describe the picture



Look at the picture. Write 4-5 sentences describing what the agent probably does normally AND what is happening right now. Use present simple and present continuous side by side.

Target language: Normally / usually + present simple · Right now / at the moment + present continuous · ...but this week we're... · I understand / I know / I mean (stative — simple) · Just to confirm...

Listening · The first two minutes of a customer call

10 min

Rita, a support agent, opens a call with Miguel, an SME customer whose invoice arrived with the wrong VAT number. Notice how she structures the opening.

Gist

1. Why is Miguel calling?

2. How does Rita structure the opening of the call?

Detail

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1. What is the first thing Rita says after 'good morning'?

2. What open question does she use to invite Miguel to explain?

3. How does she paraphrase Miguel's problem?

4. How does she signpost the length of the call?

Listen and complete

Fill in ONE or TWO words.

1. Thank you for calling Solari — this ___ Rita from the SME team.

2. Am I ___ with Miguel Costa?

3. How can I ___ today?

4. Just to ___, the invoice has the wrong VAT number.

5. Bear with me for a ___ while I pull up your account.

Speaking · Open a call three different ways

10 min

Work in pairs. Rotate roles across the tasks.

Writing · Follow-up email after a first call (90-110 words)

8 min (or homework)

Write the follow-up email Rita sends Miguel after the call in the listening. Include: a one-sentence recap ('Just to confirm...'), the corrected VAT number, a signpost of what happens next and when, and an invitation to reply. Use at least ONE present simple (routine) and ONE present continuous (right now / this week).

Workbook

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. Vocabulary in context

Complete each sentence with **ONE** word or phrase from the box. Two items are extra.

1. ___ for a moment while I pull up your account.
2. I'll ___ the whole process step by step so there are no surprises.
3. I'll put you ___ for about a minute while I check that with the warehouse.
4. ___, you want us to reissue the invoice with the new VAT number, correct?
5. I'll ___ in writing today with a summary of what we agreed.
6. Before we act, let me quickly ___ what will happen next.

2. Present simple vs present continuous

Write the correct form of the verb.

1. Normally we ___ (reply) within one working day.
2. We ___ (currently experience) higher call volumes than usual.
3. I ___ (understand) your frustration, and I ___ (look) at it right now.
4. This month we ___ (pilot) a new callback system.
5. Our team ___ (handle) about 200 tickets a day.
6. Right now the warehouse team ___ (prepare) your replacement.

3. Which sentence is more natural in a customer call?

Choose the more professional option.

1. You want to open the call.
 - ☐ **A.** What do you want?
 - ☐ **B.** How can I help you today?
 - ☐ **C.** Tell me the matter.

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2. You want to buy time to check something.

- ☐ **A.** Wait.
- ☐ **B.** Bear with me for a moment while I check that.
- ☐ **C.** One second, later I check.

3. You want to paraphrase before acting.

- ☐ **A.** OK, I do it.
- ☐ **B.** Just to confirm, you'd like us to reissue the invoice — correct?
- ☐ **C.** Repeat, please.

4. You want to signpost the length of the call.

- ☐ **A.** This will be quick, maybe.
- ☐ **B.** This should take us no more than 5 minutes.
- ☐ **C.** I hope not long.

5. You want to close the call politely.

- ☐ **A.** Bye.
- ☐ **B.** Is there anything else I can help you with today?
- ☐ **C.** OK, we finish.

4. Find and fix the mistake

Each sentence has ONE mistake. Rewrite it correctly.

1. I am understanding your problem completely.

2. We currently offering a 20% discount this week.

3. Normally the invoice arrives at Friday.

4. Bear me for a moment, please.

5. I follow up you in writing this afternoon.

6. Just to confirming, you want a refund?

5. Listening — the first two minutes of a customer call

Rita opens a call with Miguel about an incorrect VAT number on an invoice. Listen (or read the transcript) and answer.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class

1. How does Rita structure the first 30 seconds of the call?

2. How does she paraphrase Miguel's problem before acting?

3. How does she signpost what will happen next?

4. Why does she narrate what she's typing?

6. Writing — follow-up email after a first call (100-120 words)

Write the follow-up email Rita sends Miguel. Include: a one-sentence recap ('Just to confirm...'), the corrected VAT number, a signpost of what happens next and when, and an invitation to reply if anything is missing. Use at least ONE present simple (routine) and ONE present continuous (this week / right now).

7. Reading & discursive reflection

Re-read the classbook article 'The first 30 seconds'. Then answer in 100-130 words.

1. The article claims that KPIs like average handling time push agents to compress the opening of a call, which paradoxically makes calls longer. In your industry, is this true? What single metric would you add to rebalance it?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class
