

# Nameless Nuisance

**Damit Sie einfach, richtig und gut verstanden werden, wenn Sie Englisch sprechende Partner anrufen, gibt Ihnen die bekannte Trainerin Karin van der Auwera in dieser Ausgabe wichtige Tipps zur Telefonetikette.**

Barbara felt really angry with her English and American business partners: „Why don't they ever identify themselves when they call? This is not professional! They **always** make me ask for their names. I hate it!" Can you sympathize with Barbara's complaint? I certainly can. Germans are so used to getting the caller's name

## Language Focus: Ways to identify the Caller

### ■ Formal

May I ask who I'm speaking to? May I have your name, please? Could you give me your name, please? May I ask who's calling, please?

### ■ Standard

Who is speaking, please? Who is calling, please? What's your name, please? Could I have your name, please? Who am I speaking to?

### ■ If the caller wants to be put through

Who shall I say is calling?

### ■ Informal

Who's speaking? Who's there? Is that you, Betty?

first thing on the phone that we tend to get irritated if it isn't offered right away. Perhaps the situation will be easier to bear if you know that native speakers of English don't do this to make your life more complicated.

**They also don't expect you to recognize their voices. Relax!** This fear is triggered by our German mindset. Here callers who don't identify themselves either are your mother, your best friend or your lover. People who have a right to assume that you will recognize them. **In English speaking countries, this habit of not mentioning your name isn't a sign of intimacy but of modesty. In fact, it is their telephone etiquette!** It is customary to wait until the other person shows interest in your name before you identify yourself. So next time Mrs. Anonymous calls - please note - she is just trying to behave well. (Not that this gets her our special appreciation, does it?) There was a conference in London where I did a workshop on cultural differences. As people from all over the world attended, it seemed like a good opportunity to talk with the British about the telephone culture clash. Many of the other participants were most willing to emphasize how inefficient the English and American method felt to them. In fact, like Barbara, they weren't particularly subtle in their criticism. The situation needed quite a bit of diplomatic soothing to prevent our British participants from getting traumatized.

They were shocked. They couldn't believe that their unpretentious method did not necessarily win them friends abroad. But as the discussion continued, the „name-first" faction was in for a surprise.

Shirley, one of the British secretaries, told us: „If I call abroad, it is hard for me to find out which part of what I hear at the beginning of the call is the name of the person!"

Good point, isn't it? How do **you** answer the phone at your office? „Herblitz und Partner GmbH, Sekretariat Dr. Schmohl, Apparat Riethmüller, Guten Tag"? How do you identify yourself when calling abroad? "Schongauer Elektrowarenvertrieb. Bauer-schmidt. Hello."

So much for efficiency. If you don't speak German it truly can get tricky to identify the name. So the British colleagues admitted that their method means a bit more initial effort, „but as a result", they said, „you can be 100% sure that no matter how exotic the answer sounds: **This** is the name of the person." Let's change the perspective for a second. Have you ever asked yourself how native speakers of English feel a-bout our way of answering the phone? American friends of mine were very surprised about our „strange" way of starting phone conversations. So one day they asked me: „Karin, why do you state your name at the beginning of each call? We would only do that if we were Rockefeller or Clinton....." It looks as if efficiency isn't the only aspect worth considering here.



Karin van der Auwera ist eine international tätige Managementberaterin, Personaltrainerin und Autorin. Ihre besonderen Schwerpunkte sind Kulturunterschiede und Business Communication Skills.  
[www.vanderauwera.de](http://www.vanderauwera.de)

So how should we handle the different etiquettes? Both methods have some merits and some shortcomings. It's a dilemma and there is no compromise in sight.

Perhaps we could just all stick to our own rules and tolerate that we have different ways of doing things. (If possible without getting distressed, impatient or resentful about it.) So next time you feel like saying „and who the hell are you?" try to stay calm, choose one of the questions from the language focus box instead and re-member: For them their method does make as much sense as yours for you. By the way, there were two Romanian participants who had an interesting contribution to our discussion that day. In Romania, they told us, your name is the **very last thing** you mention on the phone.

„Thank you very much for calling. This was Karin speaking. Bye-bye."