



PHONE TIPS TO IMPROVE THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

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The patient experience extends beyond face-to-face connections. Phone calls are often one of the first (and sometimes last) interactions people have with your practice. The question you need to ask yourself is “What type of image is my practice projecting during every phone call?” Is your staff helpful? Friendly? Rushed? Irritated? Inattentive? Distracted?

You probably won't truly know this answer until you have a series of “Secret Shops” performed by an unbiased person or company—one that can pose as a potential patient and relay their experience back to you, putting personal connections aside and giving honest feedback.

But is good phone etiquette really important? The answer is a resounding “Yes.” The impressions your practice gives during

phone calls could be the difference between gaining a long-time, loyal patient—or losing that patient (and their referrals) forever.

There are three types of situations that can be tricky for staff to handle and frustrating for patients:

1. Angry patients
2. Active listening
3. Annoying phone trees

DEALING WITH ANGRY PATIENTS

In a perfect world, every patient would be happy and sing your praises. We all know this isn't always the case. When you encounter an angry patient on the phone, start by acknowledging their frustrations rather than making excuses. Whether it's billing problems, lack of appointment availability, long wait times, unsatisfactory results from a procedure, etc., there are ways you can try to mitigate the problem.

IN A BLINK

1. Stay calm with angry patients
2. Listen 80%; talk 20%
3. Avoid phone trees if possible

- Keep your voice calm.
- Mute yourself momentarily and take a deep breath, if necessary.
- Place a mirror in front of you and smile as you speak.
- Don't rush the call. Allow the patient to fully explain their situation.
- Remain non-confrontational and maintain a friendly personality.
- Stay 100% focused on the caller's issue.

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The Feel/Felt/Found method may work in some cases. Here's how it's done:

Feel: You let the person know that you understand how they **feel**. Without sounding patronizing, you let them know that you sympathize with their situation and your main priority is to improve the situation.

Felt: For some situations, it may be helpful to tell them that others have **felt** the same way. This would not be an appropriate response if the patient is unhappy with their vision results, but it might work for situations like wait times or scheduling conflicts. There is often a feeling of safety in numbers.

Found: The end goal with this method is to help patients understand that others have **found** satisfaction in the resolution options you are providing—assuming you have given them reasonable options. This may include a refund on the services you provided, a discount on a future service, a gift card to help smooth out the situation, or some other type of make-good gesture.

LEARNING TO ACTIVELY LISTEN

Medical staff are usually pulled in a dozen different directions at any given moment. However, no matter how busy the office is, every caller deserves to be treated as if they are the most important conversation happening at that moment. Active listening means you have 100% focus on what the caller is saying—listening 80% of the time (gathering detailed information) and talking 20% of the time (answering

questions, asking for more details, providing direction).

Sometimes the only way to accomplish this focus is by setting up a dedicated area away from your front desk where your staff can take calls without distractions. Remind staff to keep their personal conversations away from the eyes and ears of your patients.

Remember: Most callers are not experts—even if they have done online research or gathered information from social media or friends and family. It's your staff's job to help educate them by relaying accurate information clearly and professionally without interrupting them. It may be necessary to repeat or rephrase your understanding of what is being said to verify you are all on the same page.

IMPROVING YOUR PHONE TREE

Phone trees are automated systems that route callers to different parts of your practice using recorded messages. The first tip here is to avoid using a phone tree if possible. Instead, hire internal staff to handle calls or employ the services of an external call center. If neither of these options is feasible for your practice, here are some tips to streamline your phone tree:

- Set your elective procedure options in the #1 or #2 spot.
- Keep options simple—no more than four choices.
- Replace on-hold music with a human voice that highlights your practice, procedures, online options, etc.

- Test the system before implementation.
- Review your messages at least once a year and update them if necessary.

KEEP NOTES

Detailed information on every caller is valuable—especially when those callers are already patients. Record notes about patients' lives and have that information readily available so you can personalize conversations as much as possible. If callers are not yet patients, ask how they learned about your practice so you can track the effectiveness of your marketing methods.

Your staff should know answers to frequently asked questions. However, sometimes it will be necessary to transfer the caller to an expert in your office. Share as much detailed information with the expert as possible so the caller doesn't have to repeat their information.

If you can create positive phone experiences with each inbound or outbound call, you'll end up with an abundance of happy patients, positive referrals, and revenue. **AE**



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