

Telephone Quality – March 2009

We all know that practice accessibility and telephone quality are two of the most important keys to a successful practice. Providing a high standard of telephone quality needs composure and control on the part of the person answering but sometimes the sheer volume of calls and the seemingly unpredictable nature of call spikes makes this almost impossible. It is a stressful dilemma for all administrative staff in a medical practice. Therefore spend some time and effort in developing a proactive and coherent strategy for your telephone activity:

1. Study and categorise your incoming calls. Defining the main groups of calls coming into the practice may conclude with you deciding that it is worth investing in a new line for more administrative matters (like billing) so that these relatively less sensitive calls do not compromise calls of a more urgent nature (like a patient in pain). If the system allows, you could also look at telephone filtering where the call gets redirected depending upon its type to either a different person or a voicemail, where messages can be left.
2. Analyse the volume of calls and identify on what days and at what time the practice experiences relatively predictable peaks. If you have more than one administrative staff, then at these times it should be a matter of all hands on deck. You may also decide to call in temporary help to cope at these times. Remember that a lot of stress relating to incoming call volume is caused by repeat callers trying to get through. The cost of temporary help may well be less onerous than the loss of business through missed calls. Give advice to patients by asking them to avoid calling at certain times or encouraging them to use email if their need to speak with the practice is not time sensitive.
3. Reduce the number of incoming calls by avoiding patients having to call back. Do not encourage patients to call in for follow-up appointments, to organise scans or tests or to find out test results. Instead plan to call them at a time suitable for both parties.
4. Reduce the time you spend on the telephone. If you speak clearly, at an appropriate speed and have all relevant information to hand then you can significantly reduce the amount of time spent on the call. Likewise, know exactly what questions are imperative to ask during the first call. For example, make checklists of steps to take for appointment booking or patient registration. Efficiency will again reduce talk time and the need to make any annoying calls (for everyone) back to the patient.
5. Decide on a protocol for giving information over the telephone. Agree on what you need to say over the telephone, who needs to say it and what information could be given by different media to the telephone (email or through a website). If there are clear boundaries for the practice manager then the patient can be dealt with more effectively as the staff will be fully versed in giving out certain, pre-agreed information. Callers wanting non-urgent advice or information can also be called back at certain times, when you know the practice is relatively quiet.
6. Understand what your telephone system can do to help. Most systems are under-utilised and so you will not get sufficient benefit from its technology. Take time to research its functions, read the information booklet or ask someone from your phone supplier to come and train your staff. A simple function like programming frequently used numbers may seem like basic common sense but quite often common sense isn't common!
7. If your practice is of a sufficient size then pay attention to the potential to have different calls answered by different people. You may want to publish a number for appointments and then a number for billing for example so that call volume can be better controlled and answered by the most appropriate resource. Why not look at employing a receptionist, who can filter your practice calls and free up the practice manager's time to concentrate on the more important and sensitive issues.

At times the telephone is quiet, at other times you will need ten pairs of hands. It's frustrating and difficult trying to manage this very fluid environment. There are however quite a few measures, which you can take to successfully manage your incoming telephone traffic. As the telephone is the number one way for patient's to access your practice, make it a priority and reap the benefits.