



Telephone Tact

By Kate Fitzgerald

There goes the phone again. You've already got one person on hold and there's a patient standing at your desk waiting to check in. You're glad for everyone's interest, but how well do callers to your office know that? Does the phone ring a dozen times before you answer it? Are you too rushed to be pleasant? Is someone left on "eternal hold" while you attend to other calls?

That ringing phone may be inconvenient for you sometimes, but without it, your practice wouldn't be in operation. Every call is important. The way you and your staff handle yourselves on the phone determines how efficiently you can run your practice and excel with those who do business with you.

You spend good money to get people to dial your practice's phone number, thanks to your Yellow Pages listing, your stationery, marketing efforts, and perhaps, your website. "All that money is wasted if you don't make sure the caller's possible first contact with your business is favorable," says Dee Sanford of Sanford & Associates, a customer service-consulting firm in San Diego, Calif. "So be careful who you let answer the phone. Choose employees who care about your business and can convey that to those who call."

It may take some training. "Don't assume staff will be professional and courteous over the phone if you don't teach them how - even if it takes only 10 minutes," says Nancy Friedman, president of The Telephone "Doctor," a customer service training company headquartered in St. Louis, MO.

Tips for telephone tact

From the minute you answer the phone until you hang up, everything you say and do influences how the caller perceives your practice. Therefore, make sure you do the following:

1. *Put on a happy face.* Before you answer, smile. Doing so either reinforces your already-positive mood or manufactures one for you. Remember, you're glad that person called, so let him/her know that. Make it easy for him/her to want to do business with you.
2. *Be prompt.* When you answer the phone by the first or second ring, you communicate enthusiasm, efficiency, and professionalism. Sure, sometimes

you're so busy you just can't jump to the phone, but don't let more than a few rings go by before somebody answers it.

3. *Speak properly.* The caller will form an impression about you and your practice from not only your words, but your voice as well. Therefore, don't rush or mumble your words; speak slowly and clearly. Also, avoid a monotonous tone; put some life in your voice by varying the inflection.
4. *Identify yourself.* Don't wait for the caller to ask if s/he dialed the right number. Begin with a buffer of "Hello" or "Good morning," followed by your practice name, then say your own name, preceded by "This is _____," since people tend to remember the last thing they hear.
5. *Offer help.* After your name, say the words, "How can I help you?" When you use the word "how," the person focuses more on why they're calling, so you can both get to the point more quickly.
6. *Be pleasant.* Never be too busy to be nice. Being busy does not give you carte blanche to be rude. Neither does being in a bad mood. The caller doesn't care that you were stuck with a parking ticket on lunch while you were frantically running errands during your lunch hour.
7. *Be enthusiastic.* When you are, it's often contagious. The caller feels excited about interacting and doing business with you and the practice and believes that you're interested in his/her reason for contacting you. Show your eagerness to talk to and help the caller when you use an upbeat tone of voice and words that show you care.
8. *Listen actively.* Probe the caller with comments that reflect his or her words, such as "I understand what you mean," or "You seem to feel pretty strongly about this." Paraphrase the caller's words to assure him/her that you're listening and understanding what the caller is saying. Keep a pen and scratch paper by the phone so you can take notes. Also make sure you have new patient and emergency forms available so you get all the pertinent information. J. White and Associates has samples of these.
9. *Keep the caller talking.* Use open-ended questions to encourage more information from the person. The more you know about the caller and what s/he wants, the more opportunities for helping him/her fulfill his/her needs. For the dissatisfied person calling with an angry complaint, let him/her express it. This will calm the person down and provide you with valuable information to serve him/her better.
10. *Show interest.* The caller has dialed the number of your practice, not just any dental office. If the person doesn't already know s/he wants to do business with you, then the caller's at least considering it. Return his/her interest in your practice with some of your own toward his/her needs.

It doesn't end here. The caller wants to know that the positive interaction s/he experienced on the phone will be replicated when s/he comes into your office. You not only want to make a good first impression over the phone, but carry that impression into every interaction you have with the person.

Every time you answer the phone, it's an opportunity to build rapport with a potential or loyal patient. As a member of your dental team, one of your goals is to develop effective relationships with the people with whom you interact. Without them — or proper telephone etiquette - where would your practice be?