Proven Phone Tips & Techniques from Industry Consultants

It takes a caller just 30 seconds to form a first impression about your practice and only 5 to 7 seconds to decide whether to trust you.[1] What's more, 45 percent of a person's first impression is based on vocal and verbal input like your tone of voice, enthusiasm, vocabulary, knowledge and clarity of speech.[1] The first contact that most patients have with your practice is over the phone so it's critically important that they have a positive experience that engages them, answers their questions, addresses their concerns and ultimately motivates them to come in for a consultation. In this article, three of the industry's leading consultants share proven tips and techniques that you can start using right away to improve your practices' phone skills.

[1] Happy soulmates first impression statistics.

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Mastering the Phones

BILL MERCIER, President, OptiCall

Sixty-five percent of prospects do not have a procedure at the first practice they contact due to poor customer service and lack of attention,[2] says Bill Mercier, industry consultant and President of OptiCall. Here he lays out his proven action plan on how to use a strong customer service mindset to reassure callers and help them see the value they'll receive at your practice.

STEP #1 The Introduction

Remember, the initial phone call is a prospective patient's first impression of who you are and how you will treat them. So make it count. Start by greeting the caller and gathering some basic information — their name, phone number ("in case we get disconnected") and how they heard about your practice. Use phrases like, "I can help with that…" and always speak in a warm conversational tone. While you may be gathering information, don't sound like you're filling in a form. Assign informed and educated counselors to handle your calls and ensure that they are always compassionate and empathetic towards the caller.

STEP #2 Exploration

Once you have gathered their basic information, ask questions to identify the caller's needs and determine how you can help them move forward. Ask open-ended questions like "How long have you been thinking about this procedure?" and "What are your reasons for wanting it?" If the caller knows someone who has already had the procedure, ask if they were happy with the results.

STEP #3 Education

Your practice should develop a script outline to answer the most common caller questions clearly and consistently. You want to instill confidence, but don't feel inclined to relay every bit of your knowledge to the caller. Discussions that get too technical can create objections that can put potential leads on the fence. Remember, you want to sell the consultation, not the procedure. So answer a few questions, but focus on the consultation as the next step.

If cost is a concern for the caller, show compassion and empathy. Tell them about the availability of special financing offers.

STEP #4 The Close

Once you have answered the caller's questions, invite the caller to book an appointment. For those who are not ready to book on the initial call, be sure to get their contact information. Offer to send some additional information and follow up to see if the information was received and if the caller has any questions. You might be able to convert an additional 10 percent of these prospects to appointments by following up with them.

Every day practices lose potential patients because of poor phone service. Fortunately, improving patient phone conversations is an area you can control and positively influence. By focusing on and improving your customer service, you can deliver a better patient experience and book more appointments.

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For the past 20 years, Bill Mercier has been involved with numerous successful start-up companies. In 2002, after several years as a Practice Development Specialist for a mobile ophthalmologic laser company, Bill developed the concept and test-marketed his outsourced consumer communication solution OptiCall. Throughout the years, market changes have influenced and inspired other ideas and concepts that have taken the OptiCall product portfolio to new levels. Responding to industry needs, OptiCall has branched out to offer other services that help practices build and maintain their own call centers as well as software-based patient tracking solutions for optimizing prospective and current patient communications. OptiCall currently works with over 85 practices nationwide.

A graduate of Rutgers University with a degree in Marketing and Business Administration, Bill and the OptiCall staff are headquartered in Sarasota, Florida, where they provide counseling and scheduling for over 40 physicians nationwide.

Bill Mercier works with CareCredit to develop educational materials for the Cosmetic industry.

[2] Three Powerful Tricks for OWNING THE PHONE at your Office.

Creating a Better Connection with Callers

KAREN ZUPKO, President of Karen Zupko & Associates, Inc.

For decades, industry consultant Karen Zupko has been talking with practices about building effective telephone skills to help minimize negative patient experiences like the two following examples.

CALLER #1:

"I'd like some information on a procedure."

RECEPTIONIST: "Well, what do you want to know?"
(Delivered in a tone of high annoyance)

CALLER #2:

"Can you tell me what the total cost would be to have the procedure?"

STAFF: "I really have no idea. You'd have to see the doctor."

According to Karen, phone calls handled in a poor manner like these can hurt your reputation and lessen the likelihood of potential patients taking the next step and scheduling a consultation. Here she provides eight tips to help you create a better connection with callers.

1. Develop sample scripts that answer the most frequently asked questions from callers. Share them with your team so everyone can speak knowledgeably about the practice.

2. Have your team role-play, asking and answering common questions from callers. Don't forget to always ask **"When can I schedule your appointment?"**

3. When dealing with price-conscious patients, you should be able to quote a fee range. This helps patients understand if they're calling a practice they can afford.

4. Mention the availability of patient financing during the initial phone conversation to motivate phone "shoppers" who may be hesitant to schedule because of cost.

5. Listen for buying signals during the initial call. Ask probing questions such as **"What time frame are you considering for your procedure?"** The answer can tell you how serious the caller is. If you hear something like, "My kids are off to camp the last two weeks of August," they have thought through the recovery period and are probably committed to having a procedure. In contrast, if the caller answers vaguely with something such as, "Oh, I'm not really sure yet … I'm just gathering information," she is not very far along in the decision-making process.

6. Ask for a referral source. If an existing patient recommended you, the caller is more apt to be a "good patient" — someone who is more likely than the average online surfer to schedule and keep the consultation appointment. If the caller did find you online, ask follow-up questions such as **"Did you use Google or Bing to find us?"** Or **"Do you remember what key words you used?"** to gain valuable information about your online presence.

7. Always ask for the appointment. Give patients a couple of dates and times to choose from and allow them to select the one that works best for them. For example, **"Would you prefer an afternoon or an early evening appointment?"**

8. Even if a patient chooses to delay scheduling a consultation during the initial call, record their name, phone number and email address so that you can follow up with them at a later date.

KAREN ZUPKO
President, Karen Zupko & Associates, Inc.

Karen Zupko, President of Karen Zupko & Associates, Inc., is an internationally sought-after speaker, author and practice management consultant. For over 30 years, she has been advising and educating surgeons on management and marketing issues, including personnel, billing, technology, coding and practice expansion. Ms. Zupko and her team are featured regularly at events held by the American Society for Plastic Surgery, and the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery and the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons. Karen's regional training programs for Patient Care Coordinators consistently win rave reviews.

Karen Zupko works with CareCredit to develop educational materials for the Cosmetic industry.

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