

## The Art of Telephone Communication

Gilles Lamarche, DC

Even in this digital age, telephone communication is a very important aspect of successful office procedures because it is the first contact that many, if not most, of your patients will have with you and your office. It is from this first contact that many people will form the all-important first impression of you and your practice. Ineffective and inappropriate telephone communication can keep away as many patients as effective communication can bring into your office.

The techniques of telephone communication discussed in this article have been distilled from the experiences of thousands of successful doctors throughout the chiropractic world over more than four decades. These techniques have been tested, retested and proven highly effective. They have also been proven to be the simplest, quickest and most straightforward methods of communicating with sick people and converting even casual callers into healthy patients, which is, after all, one of the major objectives of good telephone communication in the chiropractic office.

Everyone who desires to acquire successful and effective telephone communication skills must have a clear picture of the attitudes, feelings and conditions existing on the other end of the line when they are communicating with anyone searching for appropriate health care. In order to achieve maximum benefit with minimum effort, the doctor and all members of the staff should memorize the applicable procedures in phraseology and use them in the precise manner described. After the basic principles of professional telephone techniques of communication have been mastered, you will be able to relax and utilize these effective skills effortlessly.

When telephone communication is practiced appropriately, it decidedly increases the number of new patients, referrals, recalls, office visits and collections by helping you serve more sick people well. In many instances, it has been found that the amount of faith, confidence and belief that prompted a prospective patient to call can actually be increased if proper telephone communication is followed, and reduced if proper communication is not followed. So, what are these proper telephone procedures and how are they developed?

### Your Voice Is Your Ally

Your voice is a vital tool in telephone and personal communication. It should be smooth and pleasant. If your voice is high-pitched, heavy with accent or grating, lower your tone by speaking more slowly and with greater enunciation. Think "love" and smile before answering the telephone. A voice with love always comes across with sweet intonations.

The difference between a tone of voice that shows a "plus" personality and one that shows a "minus" personality is easy to see, hear and feel. A plus personality tone is pleasant, friendly, cordial, cheerful, interested and helpful, contrary to a minus personality, which presents as expressionless, mechanical, indifferent, impatient, inattentive and often repelling. If you truly want to develop a "plus" personality telephone voice, choose to smile and think *love* before answering the telephone.

In the context of training for mastery, record your voice, listen to it and choose to improve it. Your

voice should be calm, cultured, professional, friendly and enthusiastic. You must encompass both decisiveness and certainty while remaining inviting. Since you represent the quality of service that is provided in your clinic, leave your personal problems outside the office.

### Stay Focused

Your mind should be free of any irritation and ready to receive that first call of the day and every call thereafter. Picture the caller in your mind and speak *with*, not *at* them. Follow the telephone golden rule - "speak on the telephone as you wish to be spoken to." Also keep in mind that the universal telephone irritation is a silent line. Please remember that one minute can seem like an hour to the caller. Therefore, limit personal conversations and strive to keep callers on hold for as little time as possible.

### Different Patients Require Different Approaches

Even though you may be prepared for each call and conscious of carrying a service attitude during a conversation, you may still encounter difficult patients. How do we handle these difficult patients? Here is a list of some of the common "types" of patients you may encounter, along with how you might choose to handle those conversations to maximize their (and your) experience:

- *The irritable patient*: may be tired, nervous, chronically ill, frequently contradictory and jumpy. This patient must be met with extreme patience.
- *The inconsiderate patient*: makes trouble, fumes, argues, misrepresents acts. This person must be treated politely, patiently and firmly, without argument.
- *The deliberate patient*: slow thinking and indecisive. Must be talked to slowly and clearly, taking one thing at a time.
- *The talkative patient*: hard to get a word in and difficult to follow, since they don't always finish what they started to say (because they've moved on to something else). May offer family history over the phone. Must be treated with self-control, making every effort to get down to brass tacks. Lead the talk and close the conversation courteously.
- *The snobbish patient*: makes slighting remarks and tends to control everything. Requires rigid politeness and good temperament without excessive deference.
- *The decisive "smart Alec patient"*: arrogant, impatient and intolerant; wishes to decide for themselves without appearing to be yielding. Should be permitted (within reason) to choose their own way; use humor, respect and patience.
- *The indecisive or "timid patient"*: does not enter the conversation with a clear understanding of what they want; desires to have facts presented confidently and clearly and their mind "made up for them," but with tact and understanding.

### Give Patients Choices

All of these situations require that you be prepared and at the same time aware of how the patient or potential patient is presenting. One simple technique is to always offer two choices at the end of the conversation. This makes the patient, no matter what "type," feel as if they are involved in the conversation and the scheduling process. It immediately breaks down walls and opens the door to a more trusting relationship.

A typical call script could be: "Good morning, ABC Chiropractic, this is Melanie - how may I serve

you today?" The patient requests an appointment and you ask, " When was the last time you saw Dr. Lamarche?" Patient says never, to which you reply: "Welcome. Is this appointment for you or your entire family?" Patient answers, "Just for me," and you reply, "Dr.Lamarche reserves special times for new patients. Would you prefer mornings or afternoons?" Based on the patient's answer to that question, give them two options for when to come in for their initial visit.

What you will find is that this script, when utilized based on your recognition of the type of patient calling, almost always works. Remember that those who appear to deserve consideration and love the least are usually the ones who need it the most. Greet every caller and situation with love in your heart and the results will be outstanding.

Next time, I'll share what information you should include in every new-patient call and how you can best greet every new patient.

NOVEMBER 2009