

Telephone Etiquette 101, Part 1

SOUNDING AS GOOD AS YOU REALLY ARE

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One of the most powerful tools we possess is our voice. In her book *Scripts for Success*, chiropractic assistant trainer Sherry Hodge states: "Part of communication is what we say and how we say it. Most of all, what we communicate must be sincere. (The feeling is also communicated.)"

What we say and how we say it can either persuade patients to come to our office or look for another office. I realize that you have heard it many times, but you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Many times when the new CA is hired, they did not realize that the position is so much more than a receptionist, back-office assistant or biller. And the new assistant may not consider how difficult it can be to answer the telephone because they do it all the time at home. The reality is that answering the phone at home is, in most cases, completely different because our purpose and intentions are different.

It is important that all team members know how important they are to the success of the practice and that the words they use are very powerful and can make or break a practice. Let's take a look at some tools that, when used, will provide callers to your office with an experience that will have them eager to come into your office to find out if you are a good match for their needs.

Sounding As Good As You Really Are: 5 Key Components

Alertness: Show that you are wide awake and ready to be of service to the party on the other end of the line.

Pleasantness: Put a smile in your voice and on your face.

Naturalness: Use simple and straightforward language. Avoid technical words and slang. The average caller doesn't know what an AP or

lateral X-ray is or what the difference is between a personal injury and workers' compensation case.

Distinctness: Speak directly into the mouthpiece, pronouncing your words clearly and distinctly.

Crispness: Watch the speed with which you speak to avoid stumbling or mumbling.

Because everyone who works in the office will be answering the telephone at one time or another, all team members should complete training on the proper use of scripts before answering the phone for the first time. They should be able to confidently respond to frequently asked questions such as: Do I have to have X-rays taken? How much does it cost for X-rays in your office? Do I have to pay on my first visit? What technique does your doctor use? Can you give me an idea of how much the first visit in your office will cost?

You and your fellow team members should also be able to address challenges such as rescheduling missed appointments, collections, and dealing with sales people. One of the best training tools is to have all team members create scripts that work most of the time for you and for your purposes. If you are turned off by the thought of using "scripts," Ms. Hodge assures: "Scripts are not meant to manipulate, but to make situations more comfortable and patients more comfortable."

Once you have created scripts that work best for you and your office, team members should role-play them until they are confident, and only then are they ready to answer the telephone. These tools can then be used to ensure success when answering calls to the office:

- Have a push-button phone with two lines and wireless capabilities. The caller should never hear a busy signal or have their call go unanswered. If you only have a single-line phone, consider contacting your phone carrier and adding voice mail and call waiting to your plan. With voice mail, the caller can leave a message if you are not available or on another call. If you are on the phone and have call waiting, you will be notified when another call is coming in.
- Invest in a good wireless headset so if you have to leave your desk, you can still answer the phone.
- Place a mirror or smiley face near or over the phone to remind you to smile before answering the phone and have your smile reflected in the tone and quality of your voice.
- Have a new-patient enrollment form next to the phone. You should get the following information from all new patients prior to their first visit: name, who referred them, cell phone number, work phone number, and/or home phone number. Establish if they need a morning or afternoon appointment, find out if their condition is related to an injury, if they have seen a chiropractor before, what condition brings them to your office, and give them directions to the office.

On a final note I was attending a recent seminar and one of the speakers called several offices of doctors who would be attending the seminar pretending to be a potential new patient, and recorded the way that their phone call was handled. It was not only shocking, but also embarrassing. Not only did the chiropractic assistants who answered the phone fail to schedule the new patient, but callers were left on hold for up to five minutes, and the CAs did not give their names or the name of the clinic.

My goal is that if you are ever recorded, your greeting and response to the caller's questions will be an example of the right way and that the new patient will have an appointment scheduled before hanging up. All other callers should be treated professionally and courteously and feel that your office is a place they are eager to come to.

Part 2 of this article continues the discussion of telephone etiquette. The goal is to ensure that chiropractic assistants provide the best service to all patients and potential patients.

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