

Recession Proof Your Practice! *Telephone Etiquette*

By Cathy Jameson

Let's talk about telephone etiquette since the telephone is the single most important marketing tool in your practice and a major communication device in today's global world.

Dental marketing experts have determined that seven out of ten people will schedule an appointment or keep an appointment with you by how they are handled on the telephone. And yet, we, at Jameson Management, are oftentimes stunned by the way people handle the telephone in dental offices. The lack of grace and courtesy is flabbergasting. So, we have to wonder: "What kind of telephone training has been provided? What kind of a role model is the doctor being if people are answering the phone in a less than delightful manner?" Or, when team members do not fulfill things that they have agreed to do, we must wonder about the professionalism in the practice.

People make a subconscious decision about the quality of your dental care by almost everything but the dentistry. Of course, the dentistry must be excellent—and performed without compromise. However, patients may judge your practice by numerous interactions other than the receiving of the dental care. The first impression is made on the phone. How is your phone being answered? With a cheerful attitude? With a clear, precise voice that can be understood? Not too fast? Not too slow? Does the person answering the phone give the name of the practice so that the inbound caller knows if he/she has reached the right number? Does this person answering give her name so that the patient—or potential patient knows who he/she is talking to and can begin building a relationship with this person—and with the practice?

A survey by the American Dental Association shows that the number one reason why a person leaves a dental practice is "unfriendly staff". This should never happen in your practice. And if seven out of ten people are making a decision as to whether or not they will schedule an appointment with you by how they are handled on the telephone, I would suggest that this critical system demands attention, training and skill development.

Does the person answering the phone know how to invite a "shopper" to come to your office for care? Does this person know how to answer questions regarding financing or insurance so that these questions are

turned into delightful and positive conversations that encourage a person to schedule an appointment with you? Does the person answering the phone know how—and always try—to convince a person of the benefits of coming to an appointment rather than cancelling? Or rescheduling rather than letting the patient say, “I’ll call you.” When a patient says, “I’ll call you”—you run the risk of that not happening and of having that patient fall through the cracks.

Be gracious to people calling your office—whether this is a patient or a potential patient or one of your network resource people. You have many people on your team, not just people who are working inside your building every day: computer experts, financial advisors, laboratory specialists, dental specialists and referring doctors, management coaches, etc. While you would not want to take the doctor away from a patient to take a call, it is imperative that you treat your network resources with respect. Their goal and objective is to be an asset to your practice. Treat them with courtesy. Treat every person who interacts with your practice with courtesy—apply the Golden Rule. That’s being a professional.

Every Person—Every Encounter

At Jameson, we do not often call a doctor unless she/he has requested and given us permission to call. However, when we place that call, oftentimes we must leave a message because the doctor is with patients—and we certainly do not wish to disturb the doctor or the patient. So, we leave a gracious message, usually with a business administrator, telling her/him that the doctor has requested that we call. We ask for an appropriate time to call with the doctor—to fulfill the doctor’s request that we do so. They usually do not know and do not offer any help here.

So, we ask if she has permission to schedule the doctor’s conference calls. Usually they do not have this authority. Why? When someone wants to speak with me, our team members have permission to schedule that call. Then they confirm the call and make sure that I have everything I need to fulfill my agreement to return the call. However, many times the doctors I am calling do not even get the message from the person answering their phones. But what is more surprising is when a doctor does get the message but does not return our call. If the doctor has changed his/her mind and doesn’t wish to speak, that’s certainly fine. But, a professional would grant another professional the courtesy of saying, “No, I have changed my mind. I do not need to speak with you now”. Otherwise, I am (and the members of my team are) placed in a position of calling and calling—so as not to upset the doctor who has requested our call. A

professional would return the call or send word as to when the call can be scheduled or indicate a change of mind to indicate that no call is necessary.

A professional has a sense of responsibility for returning calls—calls that they have personally requested. If this is difficult for you, schedule 30 minutes into your day to return calls to labs, vendors, referring doctors, colleagues, network relationships, coaches. There are many times in a well scheduled day when these calls can be made without disrupting your patient flow. If you cannot do this, then your scheduling system has a glitch in it and needs some attention. Be courteous, and respectful enough to people who are trying to reach you to know the status of the call—rescheduled? cancelled? postponed? Otherwise you are wasting a tremendous amount of the other person's time, effort and energy.

People will arrange their schedule around the call to you. If you stand them up, the waste of their time and effort is exorbitant. That is not professional—or ethical. Do what you say you will do. Again, this is true for everyone on the team. You earn respect by doing what you say you will do. Can people to count on you? This is professionalism.

Telephone etiquette is an example that represents an ethic, a principle, a mode of professionalism. The principle here is doing what you say you will do and honoring others with courtesy and respect. Obviously, this principle transcends into every aspect of your life—personally and professionally.



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