

## Phone Conduct and Patient Satisfaction

The gateway to your medical office isn't the front door. It's your voice on the phone, because most people initially dial in. For example, if you come across on the phone as hurried, that's how people might think the practice is. Here are 9 phone etiquette tactics to help your practice come across as helpful, caring, friendly and efficient.

**1. Ask callers permission to put them on hold.** This may seem like a small gesture, but it can make a big difference to the person on the other end of the phone. I know of a front desk pro who told me she learned that the hard way when she was answering several lines at once and put a distinguished-sounding gentleman on hold without asking his permission. She finally got back to him and asked his name: "Patient," he said firmly, "and I'd like to talk to the doctor as soon as possible." So she paged the doctor and said, "Patient on line one."

Turned out "patient" was how the practice's new physician partner described himself to the receptionist, who had kept him on hold for 10 minutes.

**2. Give callers a heads-up about how long they may be on hold.** A short time is one to 30 seconds. If it's going to be any longer, tell the person it's going to be a few minutes until you can get back to him. In such a situation, ask callers if they would prefer to call back or have you call them right back.

**3. Follow through when you transfer calls.** When you transfer the caller to someone who can help him, make sure to get a live person to answer. Or get back to the caller to explain that the nurse must be away from her desk. Ask if the nurse may call the person back. Then make sure to give the nurse the message right away, including what the person is calling about. That way the nurse won't have to ask the patient to start all over when she calls, which can seem rude to the patient.

**4. Do ask, "When was the last time you were in?"** Don't ask, "Have you been here before?" Asking "When was the last time you were in?" lets you determine if the patient is new without offending existing patients. A patient who has been coming to you for 15 years won't feel appreciated if you ask her if she's been in before.

**5. Acknowledge that you're listening as the person talks.** Say, "Yes, I understand" or "I see." You don't want the patient to have to say, 'Are you there?' (One receptionist says that when she first started answering phones she was always mystified why patients would ask that, until she realized she was indicating that she was listening by nodding, which the patient, of course, couldn't hear through the phone.)

**6. Never use slang on the phone,** like "Yep" or "Yup" or "Uh-huh," which can sound unprofessional or even disrespectful to some callers. Say yes and no, and use complete sentences.

**7. Hang up the phone gently.** Or better yet, let the patient hang up first. A hang up that's too hard can seem angry to the patient.

**8. Let your office manager know if patients seem to be having trouble with the automated phone menu or voice mail system.** Automated systems should not be more than one layer deep and should not offer more than four options. Otherwise, they annoy the

caller. By the time the person figures out what to do, they may forget why they were calling.

**9. Communicate with a smile.** Put a small mirror in front of you, and smile when you talk. When you smile, your entire demeanor and tone change. And the smile travels through the phone.

*Consider This: Answer the phone, if possible, after three rings. That doesn't seem like much time on your end, but it can seem like a long time to a patient who's sick or anxious to make an appointment. The office has to have enough support to answer the phones. The practice pulls staff from the back to answer phones in the early mornings when the phones are busy.*