

Using the phone system effectively



BACKGROUND

The American Dental Association (ADA) estimates the average annual expenditure of a patient who visits a general dentist is \$514, whereas those who visit a specialist have an annual expenditure of \$1755. A 90-second phone call may be all that's standing between scheduling patients for care and losing them. Every time callers are put on hold immediately or the phone skills of the call handler are insufficient, the dentist can lose significant income and the opportunity to have loyal, lifetime patients. Ways to maximize the value of phone calls were suggested.

PROBLEMS WITH PHONE CALLS

When a new patient decides to call a dental office, the receptionist has just a few moments to impress that person. Putting someone on hold is likely to result in a hang up and the individual never calling back. These missed calls account for a significant amount of revenue that is then never realized.

Not having a proper, mannerly greeting creates a poor picture of the practice. Just answering, "Dr. Smith's office" and not including an introduction and invitation can also lead the prospective patient to decide this isn't the practice for him or her.

INVESTING IN PHONE SYSTEMS

The economics of the dental practice can be exponentially changed if the phone system and those who answer it are viewed as a revenue center. Several steps can be taken to improve the phone system and its users.

Voice-over internet protocol systems

An investment in a voice-over internet protocol (VoIP) system permits greater flexibility, including creating customized greetings instantly, giving special messages when an emergency has closed the office, making available robust reporting metrics, and allowing calls to be recorded and monitored. Often VoIP systems are more cost-effective than traditional phone lines.

Many VoIP providers have added features such as RingCentral and Jive. In addition, the Weave system offers products that specifically cater to the dental market. It integrates with the core platforms so the staff can see just who's calling. In addition, Weave can direct action steps that should be taken on each call. If a caller's daughter recently had a birthday, the staff can be prompted to include that in their response. If the caller is due for an appointment, Weave can display that on the computer. It also allows the

user to pull up in-depth reports to reveal staff performance. Other platforms help in monitoring calls and provide reports as well.

User-related improvements

Phone users need training to do a better job. The callers should hear a pleasant greeting, an introduction to the responder, and an invitation to share how that receptionist can help the caller. Generally such a response takes a few extra seconds, but can convert the caller to a booked appointment. Manners need to be an important part of each call because they convey the value placed on the caller.

Outcome-based calling can be instituted. In this system, if a target is set for ending every call with a scheduled appointment, this is something that can readily be measured. Rescheduling can be allowed, but cancellations should be avoided.

Callers should be offered options. The team that answers calls should be trained to value each patient and give patients who call in a question that requires a response. For example, the individual could say, "Mrs. Omega, I'm sorry January 5 no longer works for your next appointment. We do have openings on January 10 or January 17. Which works best for you?" Consultants can help in maximizing scheduling for the dental practice.

Clear goals should be set. It's possible to turn phone answering into a competitive game and see if the team can rise to the challenge.

Clinical Significance

It's likely time to update your phone system. It may also be time to look for help from a consultant who deals with dental office communications. This will help to avoid missed calls and maximize the value of phone calls as part of a revenue-generating system. Do the research and see what can help your office ensure that it isn't missing out on the opportunity to turn phone calls into appointments.

Vet RC: Phone calls: Are you losing patients at 'Hello'? *Dent Econ* 108:24, 26, 2018

Reprints available from