



Gilly Dickons explains the importance of call-handling in increasing patient retention in your clinic

Is your practice making an exceptional first impression?

In the highly competitive sector of aesthetics it is very important that you regularly review the quality of your customer service, especially your call handling. Ideally you should take this action every three months. The aesthetic client is making an emotional and important decision in terms of having treatment, as well as deciding where to go to receive it, and this requires both a professional and personal initial response. If you have a receptionist, whether part time or full time, it is essential that they are thoroughly trained. After all, they are responsible for creating the first impression that your patient will receive of your practice. Equally, if you are an independent practitioner who handles your own calls, the following will still apply. With great initial call handling your practice will grow, enabling you to garner the right support.

I am convinced that hospitality is the one of the most important aspects of your business, and suggest that you set time aside to take a look at the various skills your front of house staff require, in order to ensure you are optimising any new opportunities. If you do not employ staff, these are skills you either need yourself, or should look to acquire via outsourcing to a specialist service. The consensus of opinion is that the current industry gold standard of converting a new enquiry to appointment is 60%. With great training and focus on the following areas this could be 75-85%, which could make a big impact on your revenue.

Any front line member of staff will benefit from call handling training; after all, they are in a sale's role, albeit a soft one. The person who answers your phone requires exceptional customer service skills, in the same way that you need to be a skilled treatment provider. As a starting point for a review of this aspect of your business, whether for staff or to critique yourself, I would recommend that you consider the following tips as a brief guide to the essential skills your staff require:

• Tone of voice

Your staff must sound warm, inviting and interested. There is nothing worse than rushing your caller, sounding distracted or having an abrupt manner.

• Calls need to be picked up within a few rings

Not left to go to answer machine. When a first time caller gets through to an answer machine they may be very reluctant to leave a message. A caller who has waited for more than 10 rings may become agitated and may question the service you are providing.

• Knowledge about the clinic

A thorough understanding of the clinic and what makes it special is essential.

• Knowledge about you

Your employees must be able to credential you and let prospective clients know why you are the person that they should choose to administer their treatment.

• Knowledge about the procedures you offer

A general understanding of the treatments that you offer is essential. Whilst you will give clients the technical information, your staff must be confident in discussing the various treatments you provide at a conversational level.

• Ability to ask the client questions

Asking questions enables the patient to open up, and when they do your staff need to sound interested and engaged. Questions should be gently probing and focused towards the reason for the call. For example, 'Have you been considering this treatment for a while?' This leads to the next point...

• Ability to listen

Listening is the key skill in building relationships. To use as a guide, here are ten commandments of active listening:

- 1) **Stop talking:** you cannot listen if you are talking.
- 2) **Concentrate:** always be prepared to listen before the need arises; stay focused.
- 3) **Acknowledge and empathise:** prove that you are listening and interested by using encouraging noises and showing empathy where appropriate.
- 4) **Be objective:** keep an open mind and do not make hasty judgements of your clients. Everyone is different and everyone's reaction to a given situation is different. Never assume and always treat each client as if they are your most important one.
- 5) **Ask questions so that you can listen to answers:** questions demand answers and help to build understanding and relationships.
- 6) **Reflect, confirm, clarify, summarise:** it is important to do this as we cannot see the person we are talking to. We need to check our understanding to maintain control of the call, for example, "So you would like to book xyz – is that correct?"
- 7) **Be patient:** allow the patient his or her say and do not interrupt them. Simply wait until they finish what they are saying. Listen to understand, rather than to reply.
- 8) **Take notes:** get the key points of the conversation down so that you can refer back to them.
- 9) **Listen between the lines:** listen for feelings and ideas behind the words. Often it is the way something is said, not what is said, that is important.
- 10) **Stop talking:** this is the first and the last commandment, as all the others depend on this action.

• Understanding key motivators/indicators

Clients always have a reason or a 'trigger' for their call. For example, an event such as a wedding or a holiday. It's important to understand this as it helps to build a strong relationship right from the outset.

• Overcoming objections

There will always be objections, most frequently regarding the cost of a treatment. Equip your staff to handle these effectively right from the start. Objections provide another highly effective way to build the relationship, so see them as positive. Objections may include price, appointment times, recovery time, how 'painful' the treatment is perceived to be, lack of support from their partner etc.

• Need versus want

Patients often ask for one thing, even though they may require something completely different. Asking questions and listening carefully will highlight any inconsistency. For example, a new caller often wants a 'quick fix' treatment, but what they really need is the very best solution for the issue they are concerned about. It is important to identify the need using gentle questions, and by building a relationship on the phone.

• Effective data capture

The minimum on any call needs to be a name and number, as well as where the patient heard about you. Some patients are only

making an initial enquiry or are simply shopping around. Ideally you will have implemented the above and there will only be 15-25% of enquiries who don't book. Ensure that you have gathered adequate information to enable you to send patients your next newsletter and other relevant material as some of them will book at a later date.

You may have identified at this stage that some of these points refer to natural skills and abilities, such as tone of voice and warmth, whilst others require training from you, such as product knowledge, for example. If you are not in a position to employ staff you can look to employ a remote enquiry management and appointment booking service to take care of your phones for you. As you seek to grow your practice, don't overlook this area or take it for granted; the time and investment you make in your call handling will make a huge impact on your success. These essential front line skills will not only impact your conversion of new enquiries into consultations, but will also enhance your existing patient's experience, contributing to increased patient retention, which in turn will increase your revenue.



Gilly Dickons is the founder of Aesthetic Response, a unique, expert enquiry management service to the UK's aesthetic and cosmetic sector. AR's team of patient advisors manage calls and diaries on behalf of a variety of practices, using exceptional customer service skills to convert valuable enquiries into consultations.



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