



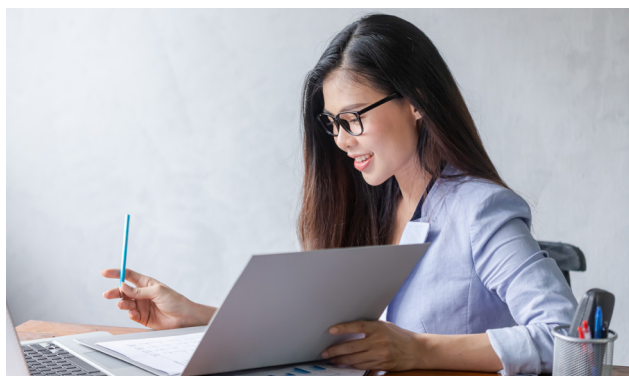
THE MOVE TO NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Aesthetic Response managing director **Gilly Dickons** looks at how technological advances and non-verbal communication are affecting aesthetic businesses

We're now experiencing the steady march into a future where verbal conversation is being eroded and replaced by messaging, either via email, texts, or social media apps. Going a step further, we're now moving towards being able to use AI to communicate for us – it's progress, right?

I am thinking of emails, texts, WhatsApp, Messenger, and live chat. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges for communication, as non-verbal conversation can be less nuanced and expressive, and more prone to misinterpretation. Overall, the move to non-verbal conversation reflects the evolving nature of human communication and how technology is reshaping the ways we interact with each other.

Some of us can remember the house phone back in the day – parents often limited its use due to charges, and there was nothing private or 'chilled' about the conversations that took place sitting



on the stairs in the hall where the phone was wired into the socket. If you wanted to head out for the night, you couldn't change plans at the last minute, and if you ran out of money to get home, you'd find a phone box and reverse the charges to call a furious parent! Thank goodness for progress – we can communicate with each other any time, almost anywhere on the planet, instantly.

With this revolution in communication channels has come a shift towards non-verbal communication, particularly among younger generations. It seems that people are avoiding picking up the phone, instead communicating through their devices, without having to speak with another person. This is largely driven by the rise of digital communication platforms like messaging apps, social media, and email, which offer a more convenient, less intrusive way to interact.

- Text-based communication allows more control over the conversation, as messages can be read and responded to at one's own pace, without the pressure of an immediate response
- Phone conversations can be seen as time-consuming and interruptive, whereas text-based communication can be done quickly and without requiring the recipient's immediate attention
- There is a preference for asynchronous communication, where people can communicate without having to coordinate schedules or find a time to talk
- Some people find phone conversations to be anxiety-inducing or uncomfortable, particularly if they have to talk to people they don't know well or are not comfortable with.

Overall, the trend towards avoidance of phone conversations reflects the changing ways in which people communicate and interact with each other, as technology continues to shape our communication preferences and behaviours.

Are automation and call filtering fuelling this? I'm sure we can all think of a myriad of instances of waiting in endless call queues, selecting from multiple options, and listening to tedious holding messages. Maybe this puts people off picking up the phone in the first place. I know that I'll often go for the online chat option, rather than the call queue. Mobile banking and online ordering, fuelled by the lockdowns during the pandemic, may have impacted this too. I also wonder about the increased anxiety we see now, especially with younger people. Mental health may also be playing a part in this need to avoid having real conversations with real people.

It's no different in business environments – there's a continuing increase in messaging, emailing and online booking across aesthetic clinics. Is this a good thing? Like everything, it has pros and cons. For medically qualified practitioners offering treatments, is this move away from phone conversations a good thing? I'm not so sure. For clinics, shifting online has a potential impact on relationships, securing bookings, attendance rates and loyalty.



While the trend towards avoiding phone conversations has advantages like convenience and greater control over the conversation, it also has downsides:

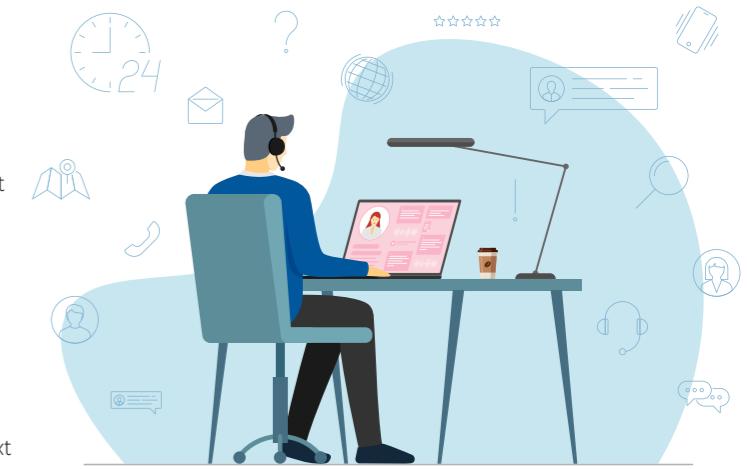
- Missed opportunities, such as converting valuable new enquiries, and locking in new patients to ensure they become regulars.
- Our experience shows more people decline a request for a deposit or consultation fee when it comes in a message. 10 years ago hardly any of our clients here used them, but now, deposits are used by almost 75% of our clients. They secure valuable practitioner time by reducing no-shows, patients are more committed and likely to proceed to treatment, and, in the event of cancellations you receive notice so can refill appointment slots. Based on our internal data here, we estimate the impact of converting new patients to appointments over the phone drops by about 5%. Some people won't pay the deposit so can't book – would they have been a no-show as they are struggling to see the value in your time and the need for a deposit/holding fee? The dropout for online enquiries must be far higher, which could be very costly for a clinic. It's much harder to secure a deposit over text as the enquirer has to move either to online booking or to speak over the phone because they can't text card details to secure the booking.
- New patients are often very specific about the treatment they want to book, and online booking accommodates this. New enquirers increasingly speaking as if they're an expert as a result of all the online information streams they explore and they book themselves in based on their assessment of their treatment needs. It would be interesting to know more about how this may be affecting consultation outcomes. What someone thinks they need may not be the case – for example, they may book to consult about a thread lift but may not be suitable and need dermal fillers, botulinum toxin, or radiofrequency treatment instead. Do they then go away from the consultation disappointed to think about things, or do they even go elsewhere to find someone who will simply give them what they've decided they need? When a patient books via an initial phone conversation, they can be more open to what they may need and a good receptionist can help simply by asking a few open questions. Then, they can discuss the consultation process, letting the caller know that the practitioner will be looking at what treatment, or combination of treatments, will give them the best results. I'd be surprised if there is not a difference in consultation outcomes between online and phone bookings.
- Text-based communication can be more prone to misinterpretation, as it lacks the tone, inflexion, and other non-verbal cues that are present in spoken communication. This has the potential to lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, especially where there may be post-treatment concerns or unhappy patients.

We're very careful in the way we manage text and message-based communications on behalf of clients:

What happens when you have a serious complaint and the patient only previously communicated via messages outside of actual appointments? Where there is conversation and relationship, many queries can be effectively dealt with and nipped in the bud. Trying to manage these via messaging is potentially a high-risk strategy. Messaging may fail to reassure a patient and there's a chance things can escalate. It's important to be mindful of the language that's used via messaging – it's a relaxed form of communication but maybe too relaxed for the aesthetics sector where patients are often having medical treatments, not simply non-invasive facials. You wouldn't text your consultant at a private hospital, or message your requests – you would either pick up the phone or send an email. Is there a happy medium?

Text or messaging can provide a written record of the conversation so needs to be managed appropriately. The use of relaxed, casual, and often affectionate terms and language can be detrimental in an escalating situation – ask yourself, in the event you need the help of your insurer, how would this conversation appear?

- **Reduced personal connections:** Phone conversations can help build stronger personal connections and foster a sense of closeness and empathy that may be more difficult to achieve through text-based communication. Online appointment booking can also reduce these personal interactions between your staff and your patients, which may impact the patient experience and limit opportunities for your team to build those key relationships.
- **Drawn-out message streams:** Online enquiries and texts/ messages can lead to long drawn-out message streams. This can also be time-consuming for clinic staff and may not be an engaging task. Clinic owners need to ask themselves if they're creating extra pressure on themselves or their team by encouraging patients to use messaging platforms.
- **Limited social skills development:** Avoiding phone conversations may impact social skills, such as active listening, conversational turn-taking, and effective spoken communication, which you need your in-house team to be great at when they're meeting and greeting your patients in person. These skills remain key to our ability to deliver great results for our clients day in and day out.
- **Perceived unprofessionalism:** In some situations, avoiding phone conversations may be perceived as unprofessional or inappropriate, such as in clinical settings where phone communication is expected, or may be preferred. Ask yourself, would you be comfortable messaging and texting the GP, dermatologist, dentist, or private consultant about your treatment?
- **Accessibility barriers:** Not all patients may have access to the internet or be comfortable using online systems, which can limit the reach and accessibility of online appointment booking, this is especially the case for older patients.
- **Technical issues:** Online appointment booking systems can on occasion be prone to technical issues, such as system downtime, slow performance, or data security breaches, which can disrupt patient scheduling and impact the overall patient experience. It's always good to have a plan B – someone at the end of the phone.



It's important that we also recognise the benefits of text-based and online communication, driven in our sector using CRM platforms and the use of mobile devices.

- **Convenience:** Online appointment booking can provide patients with the convenience of booking appointments at their convenience, 24/7. This can eliminate 'phone tag' and enhance the patient experience.
- **Increased efficiency:** Online appointment booking can streamline administrative processes and reduce staff workload by automating appointment scheduling, reminders, and confirmations.
- **Reduced no-shows:** Automated appointment reminders can help to reduce no-shows and late cancellations by providing patients with timely reminders of their appointments.
- **Improved data management:** Online booking can help clinics to manage and track patient data, including appointment history, treatment records, and billing information.
- **Cost-effective:** Online booking can be cost-effective compared to phone calls, which can be more time-consuming and require staffing resources.
- **Competitive advantage:** Offering the option of online appointment booking alongside reception teams can give clinics a competitive advantage by providing a modern, convenient, and efficient way for patients to access their services.

Overall, online appointment booking can improve the patient experience, streamline administrative processes, reduce no-shows, improve data management, and provide a cost-effective way for clinics to manage appointments.

Often on clinic websites or adverts, the 'call to action' is to send the enquirer to complete a contact form, or even to visit social media channels, not to encourage them to pick up the phone. You must hunt through a website to find a phone number, which is, of course, an attempt to lead people to enquire or book online. Why not also encourage people visiting your website to pick up the phone? Allow yourself to build relationships and identify their needs. This will result in higher conversions to treatment, leading to increased revenue.

In conclusion, as with most things in life, it's all about balance! Whilst actively avoiding phone conversations may appear to have advantages, it's important to recognise the potential negative consequences and balance the benefits of text, online, messaging based communication with the advantages of spoken communication. 