

Preventing “Telephonitis” in Your Patients Calvin Sun

Depression. . . .anger. . . .frustration. . . .

Your patients come to you when they have these symptoms, and you’re trained and paid to treat them. What happens, though, when these symptoms arise from “telephonitis”?

What if the cause of their symptoms is your telephone system, and the way you and your staff handle the telephone?



Poor telephone system design and manners are not just annoying — they reflect poorly on your practice. But changing things is simple and can make a positive impression on current or potential patients. This isn’t your father’s medical profession anymore—if patients are annoyed enough, they could simply leave, taking with them that already small-enough co-pay.

Here are some tips that can prevent telephonitis, and thereby give callers a better impression of your practice. They apply to your automated telephone system, your receptionist or assistants (or anyone else who screens calls and callers), and medical professionals themselves.

Automated Systems

Automated telephone systems, like sushi, the Dallas Cowboys, or country music, are something people can’t be neutral about. They either love them or they hate them. If patients or potential patients hate your phone system, you have a problem. What features can arouse such hatred?

- **Dial by Name** This feature, which allows after-hours callers to reach a particular person, is convenient. However, callers need to know how to reach it. Take a moment to review your after-hours greeting. Make sure it gives correct instructions on how to reach

dial-by-name. This advice sounds obvious, but I have seen too many phone systems that neglect to tell callers how to dial by name.

After the caller presses the right buttons to reach the requested party, the system should announce the name of that party before connecting. Callers want to be sure that they’re being connected to the right person. A lack of this announcement, coupled with a voicemail greeting that omits the person’s name, could result in a misplaced message.

When your system acknowledges the name of the requested party by announcing it, make sure it does so as the person’s “real name.” Don’t make the caller hear a letter by letter announcement. Callers might be OK if the person they’re calling is film director A-n-g L-e-e. They would get really annoyed, though, if they’re calling conductor M-s-t-i-s-l-a-v R-o-s-t-r-o-p-o-v-i-c-h.

If you have an after-hours greeting, make sure it includes your normal hours of operation, so that callers know when they can reach a live person.

- **Access to a live person** Nothing infuriates a caller more than being stuck in “voicemail jail” — that is being unable, no matter what key the caller presses, to reach a live

person. Make sure your system brings a live person onto the line, either when the caller presses a key such as 0, or if caller does nothing. The “do nothing” possibility would apply to callers who are unable or unwilling to press a key option.

Do not simply repeat your main greeting and options list if the caller does nothing, or else the caller might never reach a live person.

Make sure that the ability to reach a live person applies to sub-options of your telephone system as well, not just at the main level. For example, suppose a caller presses “4” at the main menu to reach your lab. Suppose the lab is closed and the caller hears voicemail. That caller still should be able to press a key (such as 0) to reach a live person. Don’t trap the caller in that sub-option.

Also, what about during off-hours? Is your system smart enough to recognize that a receptionist will be gone? Will your system therefore perhaps play a “Sorry, we’re closed” message, then put the caller into a general voicemail box, then hang up? Or will it simply keep ringing?

- **“Looping” announcements and continuous ringing** These issues relate to the previous one. You probably have encountered telephone systems for which you failed to press any of the options listed. In response, the system simply repeated its initial greeting and options list a second time, then a third time and so on. If you have this design, get rid of it. The fact that the caller didn’t do anything means he or she didn’t understand, or had a matter that your menu didn’t address. Instead of looping, switch the call to a live person.

Similarly, watch out for extensions that lack voicemail capability. If a caller reaches that extension, and no one is there, it will simply ring indefinitely, allowing the caller neither to leave a message nor transfer to a live person.

These problems in design do more than annoy callers. Suppose your caller, when hearing your main menu, tries to hang up, but doesn’t do so completely, so that the line is still active? If you have toll free access, your phone bill could exceed the Argentinean national debt. Even if you don’t, that caller (even unintentionally) has tied up a line, preventing other patients from calling in on it.

Screening Calls

Be careful when screening calls. How many times has someone browbeat you for that report that is due right now? A week later, though, you see that report sitting unread on the person’s desk. Why would this situation upset you? Would it be because you worked hard, but nothing was done with your work, and you feel it was done for nothing?

Avoid doing the same thing with callers. In particular, if you screen calls — that is you ask the caller’s name — make sure you do something with that information, and make sure the caller knows you have done something. Show that you are adding value, and are not simply a conduit.

When asking for the caller’s name, use a polite question such as “Who may I say is calling?” rather than the brusque “Who’s calling?” Once you hear the name, use their name in addressing them. Until or unless told otherwise, use the honorific “Mr.” or “Ms.” along with the surname of the caller.

Don't surprise the caller with voicemail: The caller has asked for a particular person. You have done what you were supposed to do, that is, ask politely for the caller's name. At this point, you're unsure of whether the requested party is available or not.

What if the party is unavailable? If you simply transferred the caller and then went on to do something else, the caller will probably get the party's voicemail greeting. What will that caller think? He or she will think, "What was the point of giving my name, when all they do is put me in voicemail?"

Instead, check the extension yourself. If the party is unavailable, and you start to hear the voicemail greeting, come back to the caller and let that caller know. Give the caller options, either to leave a voicemail message, leave a paper message or to call back later. If the party is available, tell them who the caller is. After all, you asked for it, so make use of that information by passing it to the requested party.

Greet the caller by name. If you are the requested party, and the receptionist has told you the name of the caller, you too should make use of the name. Greet that person by his or her name, i.e. "Good morning, Mr. Smith." Don't use your standard greeting, "Hello, this is [your name]." Greeting the caller by name saves time, because the caller doesn't have to repeat his or her name. In addition, the caller feels important and appreciates that something was done with his or her name information. Most importantly, the caller appreciates hearing his or her name, which is to that person, according to Dale Carnegie, the sweetest sound in the world.

General voicemail tips

Record your own greeting: When I call a person and get that person's voicemail greeting, that greeting is usually the voice of that person—usually. Sometimes, though, I will call (generally) a male party, and a female voice will answer with a greeting the following:

"You have reached the voicemail of John Jones. Please leave a message and he will call you back." What kind of message does this greeting send? Maybe different from what you intend. You are telling the world (whether you mean to or not) that "I'm incompetent. I don't know how to set my own voicemail greeting."

And be sure to include your name in your voicemail announcement to avoid confusion, especially in the event of mis-dialed calls.

Speakerphones

Use speakerphones with care. Sure, using the speakerphone lets you do other things while talking. But remember, the speakerphone allows others in your office to hear that call. This situation might be a problem,

given the privacy concerns associated with HIPAA. So before you put a caller on speakerphone:

- Ask permission from the other caller, and explain why you need to use the speakerphone. For example, perhaps you are attempting to resolve a technical problem, and would like the caller to talk to your staff at the same time as you. Once people realize what's in it for them, chances are they'll go along.
- Identify others at your end who are listening.
- Use a conference room or empty office, and shut the door.

Congratulations. If you follow these tips, you will go a long way towards reducing or preventing telephonicitis.



Calvin Sun trains and consults with organizations to improve their customer service and communications, and speaks frequently on these topics. He has been featured in the Washington Post, Computerworld and the Philadelphia Business Journal and has been quoted in The New York Times. Holding an M.B.A. from the Wharton School, he currently is studying at Temple University Beasley School of Law. He can be reached at 610-296-3947 or via e-mail at csun@calvinsun.com.



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