

## Enhancing Telephone Communication in the Dental Office

Mark E. Jensen, MS, DDS, PhD



### Abstract

Answering the telephone is an important first contact with the dental office. The voice tone, inflection and other non-verbal aspects of the person answering all have a profound impact on how the caller perceives the dental office. Suggestions are presented which are designed to avoid communication problems and to project a positive professional image to a caller. Audio clips are included to demonstrate variations in telephone technique to assist the reader in the development of a telephone answering protocol that reflects a desirable image for the office staff and for the dental practice.

## Introduction

The telephone has been an essential communication tool for business since the early 1900's. As is the case with most tools, skill is required to maximize its effectiveness. Failure to use the business telephone in a proper manner may not only result in the ineffectiveness of the user, but may result in having a detrimental effect on the business.



Effective interpersonal communication is a blending of factors, that when blended together, result in effective communication with other people. These factors include word selection, grammar, volume and tone of voice, inflection, speaking rate, facial expression and body. These factors have to work in harmony and must be congruent if the intended message is to be conveyed properly to the receiver of the communication. To make a statement of apology to someone in a loud voice, with an angry tone while shaking a finger in his/her face, would fail to convince the listener of the sincerity of the person attempting to apologize.

It has been said that the first thirty seconds of a telephone conversation sets the tone for the caller's relationship with the dental office. The patient's first contact with your dental office may be a telephone call and the first impression of the image and style of the practice begins to develop. The practice image is perceived right from the start of this first call. The answering content may be completely correct or even directly from a written script, but may project the wrong image due to the "non-verbal" aspects of the speaker's voice. These include unusual pauses in a normal speaking pattern, vocalized pauses (ah, uh, mmm) and changes in tone of the voice to men-

tion a few. These "non-verbal" aspects of the person's voice answering the phone play a critical role in communicating the image of the practice.

Baldone recognized the importance of the telephone in the dental office and described "proper" techniques for telephone use in 1965.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Bonner has reviewed the importance of the telephone in the dental office as an element of internal marketing.<sup>2</sup> When the first contact with a prospective patient is by telephone, special attention has to be paid to communication factors primarily because the caller cannot see the person at the other end of the telephone line. Without visual input, a caller relies entirely on the sound that emerges from the telephone to formulate an opinion about the person at the other end of the phone line.

## Technique

Consider the fact that virtually everyone is a caller to a business at one time or another. As a result, most individuals have experienced the pleasure of speaking with a pleasant and competent individual. Conversely, most adults have experienced the frustration of attempting to communicate with someone who fails to measure up to this description. As a caller, it is reasonable to expect the person who answers the telephone to be courteous, organized and helpful. If those qualities are not part of the caller's experience, then there is a distinct possibility that a negative opinion will be forged about both the business as well as the person answering the telephone.

The staff in each dental practice should establish and use an agreed upon telephone protocol and communication style which will reflect a positive image for the dental practice when the telephone is answered. This topic is addressed by Jennifer de St. Georges in an article she wrote about the consideration of factors for success in the dental office.<sup>3</sup> The protocol should include the following strategies.

## Be Prepared....

A cardinal rule in maximizing effective telephone communication is, "be prepared to receive a call." Any person in the office who will be answering the telephone must be prepared with the necessary tools (notepads, charts and scheduling book) but even more, the person should be emotionally prepared to answer.

It is essential that the receptionist organize the items that may be needed during a call to avoid delays in the conversation and to avoid sending a message of disorganization in the office to the caller. The appointment system (computerized or traditional appointment book) must be readily available near the site of the telephone receiver or headset. Similarly, any office message system, whether it is computerized or consists of paper message pads, should be close at hand and ready to use if needed. Message system information forms should be formatted to ensure that all critical information is obtained and recorded for future use. Access to the patient's computerized, or conventional dental record may also be helpful before initiating a call to a patient regarding an appointment, or his/her past care.

### **Who and When....**

The dental office manual is a good vehicle to document the elements of a telephone protocol. This includes the identification of who should answer and when the telephone should be answered.

Control of the appointment schedule may be shared by more than one employee and a written telephone protocol will help to delineate the responsibilities of all who participate in the communication and appointment management process. If the telephone is to be answered by selected employees, then the protocol should include this limitation.

Some protocols call for answering the telephone by the end of the first ring, while others call for answering by the fourth ring.<sup>4</sup> It has been suggested that conversation with someone in the office should be suspended after a telephone line is opened.<sup>4</sup>

### **It's in the Voice....**

Webster's Secretarial Handbook<sup>4</sup> considers it a necessity that the person answering the telephone use "an alert, pleasant, well-modulated, cordial, cheerful voice..." It, furthermore, suggests that good basic telephone usage requires "...tact, courtesy and a genuine attempt to help the caller..." Upon answering, the telephone handset should be properly positioned so that the person can hear the caller in the receiver and so that the caller can, in turn, hear the dental staff member. For traditional handsets, about one and one-half inches away from the mouth is recom-

mended to maximize the clarity of the voice. If a telephone headset is used, then the manufacturer's recommendations should be followed for positioning the headset microphone. The caller should not miss the first part of the greeting due to extraneous noise or improper telephone positioning. The person receiving the call should try to avoid asking the caller to repeat their message just because they failed to position the handset properly.



Voice tone or vocal factors include pitch, tone, volume, rhythm, inflection, etc. are a critical part of the message conveyed on the phone. If the voice is "raised," an emotion of frustration or anger may be communicated. Increased volume with irregular inflection can project cheerfulness. Voice pitch can communicate a lot about style and emotions. Anger and excitement tend to cause a rise in the voice which may communicate frustration and anger. Low pitched, monotonal speaking patterns may communicate indifference, laziness, or even incompetence.

The voice tone of a person answering the telephone becomes the personality of the office for the caller. A positive, enthusiastic attitude must shine through when the phone is answered. Positive language includes the use of such words as "can," "will," "shall," and "certainly." Energy and expression should be put into the voice. It is important to interact with a pleasant and "smiling" voice. More vocal expression is required when communicating over the telephone than when having a personal interaction in order to compensate for the loss of visual contact. The person

answering the telephone should use friendly, positive voice tones consistently to be an effective communicator. It may actually be helpful to physically sit up and not slouch prior to answering the phone. Facial expressions and gesturing, as if face to face, often are helpful aids in the infusion of desirable voice tones and non-verbal. The voice should be made lively and the person must genuinely sound interested in helping the caller.

If the rhythm of the voice is unsteady or too fast, the greeting will be hard to follow or even lost entirely. Therefore, the rhythm should be comfortably paced and steady. The timing or pace may communicate important clues. A long,

drawn out pace may project indifference, while a short reply can indicate impatience. Friendliness is conveyed through voice tone by inflection at the end of statements with a lilt in the voice. The voice should have clarity so the caller will have no trouble understanding. The deliberate clarity of the voice is necessary for this communication of a friendly greeting with an offer of help.

### Elements

Telephone protocol should include the necessary elements of an answering technique as well as how to handle each type of call. Examples of desirable answering techniques are listed as follows:

**Table 1. Example of Proper Telephone Greeting**

Element	Example	Comments
Pleasant Greeting	“Good Afternoon” “Thank you for calling...”	Use an appropriate polite courtesy statement. This may be a time of day like the example, or an expression of appreciation for calling “Pine Knoll Periodontics.”
Practice Identification	“Pine Knoll Periodontics.” “Dr. Lincoln’s Dental Office”	This assures the caller that they have dialed the correct number.
Person Identification	“This is Barbara”	This may vary in formality from a nickname, like “Barb” to “Mrs. Williams” depending on the formality of the office. This element of a greeting conveys to the caller that they are speaking with a real person and not connecting with a voice messaging service or device.
Offer of Assistance	“How can I help you?”	The offer of assistance should convey the practice image in the form of a question. In a large group practice, a central receptionist might choose to use, “How may I direct your call?”

## Multimedia Feature

### Say it Aloud....

Use the telephone answering exercises below to practice conveying different "messages" to a colleague in the dental office using the same script. Try using different variations in your speaking pattern, changes in voice volume, pitch and speaking rate. Find the style that best fits the practice image that needs to be conveyed to callers. This is a more effective training exercise if an actual telephone is used. Business phone systems with two lines into the office are ideally suited for practicing telephone skills.

For readers whose computer has a sound card and speakers as well as a multimedia player plugin for their browser, these exercises are presented in audio format aid in illustrating the importance of the fundamental elements of telephone answering techniques in the dental office. Click on the exercise of your choice to hear the audio.



### Conclusion

Use of the telephone in a proper manner requires some attention to detail presented in this article. Practice may be required using a real telephone system as an in-service training exercise. While the examples presented here were greetings, the principles of being pleasant, helpful and organized apply to all other types of telephone communication as well.

Phone Greeting: "Thank you for calling Pine Knoll Periodontics. This is Ann, how can I help you?"	
<b>Exercise 1</b>	Greeting read too fast, and insincerely. Now read it with warmth and sincerity as you think it should be conveyed to a patient.
<b>Exercise 2</b>	Greeting read with an awkward rhythm. Now read it with warmth and sincerity and the rhythm you feel appropriate.
<b>Exercise 3</b>	Greeting read with timidity and with very low vocal volume. Now read it with proper confidence and vocal volume you feel appropriate.
<b>Exercise 4</b>	Greeting read with a monotone and without enthusiasm. Now read it with a friendly lilt in your voice with enthusiasm you feel appropriate.
<b>Exercise 5</b>	Read the greeting as you feel it should be read, but this time use hand gestures, smile while you speak and see if these help improve your message to the caller.
<b>Exercise 6</b>	Read, "Pine Knoll Periodontics please hold." Then try this approach. "Thank you for calling Pine Knoll Periodontics. This is Ann, how can I help you?" pause for the person to respond, then explain briefly that you are just finishing with another party and ask the patient to hold for a moment and you will be right back with them.

## References

1. Baldone JC. Proper telephone technique for the dental office. Bull Acad Gen Dent 1965; Sept 37-40.
2. Bonner P. Internal marketing of the dental practice. Dent Clin North Am 1988; 32: 47-58 1988;32: 47-58.
3. de S. Georges J. Answering the call to success. Dent Pract Manage 1995;20: 22.
4. Eckersley-Johnson AL, ed. Webster's secretarial handbook. Second Edition. Springfield, Mass: Merriam- Webster Inc., 1983:24-28.

## About the Author

**Mark E. Jensen, MS, DDS, PhD**



Dr. Jensen is in private practice. Correspondence related to this article can be sent to him by mail at the following address:

Mark Edward Jensen, MS, DDS, PhD  
Suite 160  
700 Village Center Drive  
North Oaks, MN 55127

e-mail: [mjensen@skypoint.com](mailto:mjensen@skypoint.com)

