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# Don't answer the phone until it has rung three times...

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**ABSTRACT:** We all had 'play telephones' when we were young, so answering a phone must be second nature – but have we drifted into some bad habits? Answering the phone too quickly is one of them. This article stresses the importance of the phone to the practice and looks at the sort of things you should have covered in a practice policy on phone handling. It provides practical tips and some thoughts on why you should not answer the phone in less than three rings.

BT maintains that 98 per cent of initial client contact with a practice is by telephone. So, obviously, good telephone skills are essential in your practice.

No matter how good the practice is, the way that first phone call is handled is crucial. For many new clients, the phone is the *first* contact with the practice. It's important that it is not the last.

Is the telephone your friend or a foe? While it has a nasty habit of ringing when you are busy dealing with clients or their animals, like it or not, it is your contact with the outside world.

You have to rely on your voice and telephone manner to 'sell' the practice to make sure clients bring their pets to your practice and do not take them somewhere else.

This point of contact is a major source of business for your practice. The practice needs this work to stay in business. It keeps you in a job. Yes, that's how important your telephone skills are – they help keep you in a job!

Perhaps the best way to understand how important it is, comes from taking note of what other organisations sound like when you contact them. Doctors, hairdressers, laboratories, Defra, pharmaceutical companies, shops, take-aways – listen carefully to them all and review them critically in your own mind.

Would you like to sound like them? Why? What was good about it and what left you wondering?

## So what are the skills you need?

The next step is to try to assess how *you* sound on the phone. Would you like to be treated that way? Are you falling into habits that you don't like in other organisations? Try to develop a style of your own that includes all the good points of other people's manner and avoids all the mistakes. There is no need to conform to a strict pattern if you have your own style that works well.

Remember, with a telephone contact you are at a disadvantage – the caller can't see you. You have to project all the right messages using only your voice. You cannot establish any eye contact, you can't see how they are reacting to you. People listen more acutely on the telephone because the ear is the only point of contact. They are more easily distracted by background noises, so these need to be kept to a minimum. Do they 'see' what they 'hear'?

Whether your job involves staying in one position to use the phone – as a receptionist might – or answering any phone, anywhere in the practice – as a nurse might – the points in this article apply to every situation.

## Preparation for incoming calls

There is a set of basic principles to follow:

**Place** – *where* is the phone? Is it accessible? Which hand is easier for you to talk and write with?

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**Recognising clients** – regular clients may expect it, but it is not an easy skill.

**Recording information** – *always* have a pen and paper handy; a messages book is far better than scraps of paper which are easily lost.

**Know the whereabouts of people** – if you don't know, don't admit it! Say they are in theatre and will call you back. *You* make sure they do. You promised!

**Making contact** – get the message through, too. If the caller wants to speak to a vet, say you are going to call their extension rather than "I'll see if they are around". It is more professional.

**Practice policy** – what you do about transferring calls, quoting prices, availability of vets should be known beforehand.

**Dealing with multiple calls** – it will depend on the phone system you have as to what you can do. Know what the policy is and who will pick up the next call.

## Practice phone policy

Does the practice have a phone answering policy? If not, here are some ideas, to consider when creating one:

- How long do you allow the phone to ring before answering it?
- Do the staff have a script for answering the phone?
- Who should be taken care of first – the waiting room client or the phone caller?
- Have you been trained in how to answer the phone?
- How do you handle the 'phone shopper'?
- Do you have Call Minder or a call-waiting system?
- Do you smile when you answer the phone?

## Somebody answer that phone!

Don't answer too quickly! Fewer than three rings is the norm. Answer any sooner than three, and the caller will not have had time to compose themselves and be ready to talk.

Have you ever answered the phone so fast that, having said your 'piece', the caller says: "Is that the vets?"

Three rings on your phone equates to only two at the caller's end. Answering the phone on one ring implies that you are not busy, and hovering over it, waiting for it to ring. Moreover, answer too quickly and you are unlikely to have composed *yourself* to deal with the caller.

## Let me see the script

Everyone (including the vet) who is likely to answer an external call should use a similar form of greeting. But it should not become stereotyped. Don't make the greeting sound like it is a script, and don't make it so long that it has cost the caller 50p before they can speak.



A simple greeting, the name of the practice and how can you help, will suffice. Whether or not you include your name is up to you – remember personal security.

Many service companies' phone greetings are obviously scripted, and so sound false and insincere. They generate the wrong impression, which is the last thing you want.

## Take care of the client in front of you first

If you are dealing with a client in the waiting room when the phone goes, by allowing it to ring three times, you have the opportunity to apologise to the client for the interruption. It also allows you to get paper and pen ready to take a message. Then answer the phone...

## Training

All practices should spend time on training staff how to answer the phone correctly. Just being told "There's the phone," is not good enough. Neither should training be just a 'one off' when staff join the practice; it should be reviewed on a regular basis.

## The Telephone Shopper

"Could you tell me how much...?" Every day you will hear from callers wanting to know how much your fees are for a particular product or procedure. Handling these calls correctly can generate new business.

So before giving the information requested, ask some questions about the pet – its age, breed and sex. Also ask them for an address so that you can send them a copy of a practice leaflet.

*Then* tell them what they want to know, and explain why your practice offers excellent petcare. Show an interest in their situation, and try to provide appropriate solutions where necessary.



## Expository Questions

### What did research, reported in the article, say about telephone usage?

- Clients like to text you.
- Clients' use of the phone is declining.
- 98 per cent of people's first contact is by phone.
- Most client contact today is through the internet.

### Which of these issues was not mentioned as being important in your practice telephone policy?

- How long you should let the phone ring before it is answered.
- Banning the use of mobile phones in the practice.
- Queue management – reception vs. caller.
- Call Minder systems – what to do with them.

### What should you do if the phone rings while you are serving a client in reception?

- Take the call at once – it might be an emergency.
- Tell them the practice policy on such matters.
- Leave it until someone else in the practice picks up the phone.
- Apologise to the person in reception and tell them you will deal with the call promptly.

### As well as the issues mentioned in the article, what additional problem could you create if you answered the phone sooner than the third ring?

- The caller will not have had time to compose themselves and be ready to talk.
- People may not hear your welcome.
- You may create the impression that you are not busy.
- The boss may think you are not busy.

## Answers & Explanations

### Question 1

- No, while they might like to text, around 98 per cent of people's first contact is by a phone call.
- This was not mentioned specifically in the article. Different practices will have different levels of preference on phone and web page use.
- Yes. According to BT, most clients use the phone to contact the practice on a given matter.
- This was not mentioned specifically in the article. Different practices will have different experiences on phone and webpage uses.

### Question 2

- Yes, this was mentioned. We recommend that you don't answer the phone in less than three rings, but which ring wasn't mentioned.
- No, this was not mentioned, but nonetheless it is worth addressing private mobile phone use in the practice.

- Yes, this was mentioned. Agree how best to handle the situation. But which way wasn't mentioned?
- Yes, this was mentioned. What to do if you have Call Minder or a call waiting system needs to be discussed and agreed.

### Question 3

- No. It only takes a moment to apologise to the person in reception before answering the call.
- No. Clients will not be interested in your policy – they want to feel that they are being treated professionally and politely.
- No. Most practices will not expect 'non-front of house' staff to answer outside calls as they should be concentrating on their own job. This may still be an option in smaller practices or where staffing levels are low owing to illness, for instance, but it should not be the default position.
- Yes. It is best to ensure that the person in front of you is treated with courtesy – then apologise to the caller for keeping them waiting.

### Question 4

- Yes.
- Yes, which is why they may ask, "Is that the vets?" But which ring wasn't mentioned?
- Yes. Having a job that requires you to hover over the phone doesn't appear that important, either!
- No.