Dealing with people is probably the biggest problem you face, especially if you are in business, Dale Carnegie. I wonder why so many dentists make it hard to do business with them? I have received the results of a survey compiled by Exela & Red Virtual Office and they make interesting reading. The purpose of the study was to determine the speed and quality of response to patient enquiries from a random sample of dental businesses in the UK. They used both telephone and web-based enquiries in a "Mystery Shopper" exercise. The enquiry focused on the provision of general dental services for a family relocating to the area served by the practice. If the call went to voicemail, a number was left and a call back requested.

The old saying is that you only get one chance to make a first impression and many practices ensure that their front desk people are trained to "smile" when they answer the telephone, to always give the caller their name and have a script to follow when they get into a conversational mode with a potential new patient. All fine and dandy but what if the first impression is of a slowly answered telephone or even worse, no answer at all? Do we apply to our businesses the standards that we expect of others?

Research
There has been lots of research into what consumers perceive as high standard of care and courtesy - dentistry isn’t unique. An acceptable Average Speed to Answer (ASA) is deemed to be 50 seconds – equating to four rings. More than 50 seconds and a number of callers hang up – 65 per cent hang up after four rings.

First the good news, the calls that were answered were done so in a pleasant and friendly manner with helpful and informative receptionists.

- 39 per cent of the practices called answered the call promptly and efficiently.
- 18 per cent were middle of the road answering within four to six rings.
- 34 per cent of all calls were not answered at all.

Of the unanswered calls 62 per cent were handled by answering machines. In spite of the ubiquity of voicemail, studies by Henley Business centre have shown that 80 per cent of callers do not leave messages.

Some more statistics:
- 64 per cent of dental patients call during “peak” times (start, lunch, and end of day).
- 87 per cent of dental practices close during the lunch period and hope that their patients will leave a message.
- Of those callers who do leave a voicemail, 60 per cent received a call-back during their working hours meaning that they had to make a second call attempt in order to contact the practice.

Do we make it easy to do business with us?
You only get one chance to make a first impression, says Alun Rees.

"Dealing with people is probably the biggest problem you face, especially if you are in business"
don't leave a voicemail.
• 26 per cent of new enquirers don't call back if the line is busy.
• 85 per cent of new enquirers don't call back if the call isn't picked up at all.

During lunch times and school holidays practices can expect to receive 50 per cent higher call volumes. This needs additional capacity to manage the over-flow calls but in reality:

• 55 per cent of practices rely on answering machines to cope with over-flow calls.
• 24 per cent have no over-flow facility. Therefore the line is engaged or rings out.

Patient Frustration
The result of this is patient frustration, a poor impression given of practice efficiency and a potential loss of business. If nearly half of all enquiries are lost due to the patient having difficulty reaching the reception what message does it send?

Even if there is a system to book next appointments in person 45 per cent find they need to re-arrange these due to other commitments.

Of the 100 practices surveyed, 90 had websites, three of which had technical errors so were not functioning correctly. Eighty one of the sites had a “contact us” web form. Of those sites with contact forms, only eight generated any sort of auto-response acknowledging the enquiry. Worse still more than half (52 per cent) of practices did not follow up on the enquiry.

What this excellent little report tells me is that large numbers of practices don’t appreciate what their existing and potential patients want and need from them. Ask yourself the question; do you expect better service from others than you provide yourself? What really happened to those patients who you saw regularly for several years but then just disappeared? The area of lunchtime cover has always been and remains a thorny subject in many minds, yet those practices that appreciate that their patients have limited access to use a telephone during the working day, and take steps to cater for that, are rewarded for their efforts.

Perhaps you don't think that this is important. For those looking to provide a high quality of care to discerning patients who you want to expect the best that you can offer, then high standards in those areas that they encounter first will encourage them to use your services.

What are the solutions? If your practice is large enough, ensure that you have one person dedicated to dealing with incoming calls. This removes the need of a receptionist “multi-tasking” to dealing with patients in person and trying to cope with the telephone. This alone doesn't remove the problem of blocked lines at busy times of the day, so consider the services of a virtual office with a dedicated and well trained staff that can contact you by email within seconds of dealing with your call. Those practices that use this or similar backup services have appreciated that the cost of the service is more than covered by the income gained by giving exceptional service.