Attention dentists, hygienists and all other wet finger operatives. Imagine if you will that you have no appointment system. People turn up when they feel like it and bang repeatedly on the door of your treatment room, regardless of how busy you are. As more people arrive they also start banging on the door. When you let one of them in you discover they’re not a patient and you have no notes on them. Nevertheless they sit themselves in your chair and demand attention. They may be there for five minutes or half an hour. Meanwhile, the banging on the door is getting louder...

A nightmare scenario? Noo... just a typical working day for a receptionist through the prism of being a dentist. For front of house staff, answering the phone is just one of their many routine tasks yet the way they do it and what they say can significantly affect practice profits. I’m amazed that some practices spend time and money attracting potential patients (read part two to find out how) and then don’t ‘close the deal’ by overlooking the training and on-going development of their reception staff.

I’ve been on both ends of the telephone. Practice owners employ me to play the role of potential new patients to assess how well the telephone is answered. As extreme examples, reception staff can be ‘captured spies’ – persistent questioning is required to elicit any information – or they can be ‘monologue-ists’ – they emit a continuous stream of words, often repeating themselves rather than pausing for breath!

I exaggerate for effect, not to imply criticism. Answering the phone in a practice is hard work. I’ve done it when clients have been suddenly left short-handed and judged it as akin to running a mental marathon with the added hazard of random hurdles to leap over and arbitrary hoops to jump through. Oh, and the occasional wayward mobile ‘banana’ to trip over.

When you answer the phone you have no idea who is calling. Within a few seconds you may determine their gender from the sound of their voice. You don’t know their name, age, mood or their reason for calling. They may be in a hurry or relaxed. They could be warm and dry or getting cold and wet. They may have good or poor hearing and there could be little or lots of background noise.

Okay, let’s start considering what mistakes can be made when answering the telephone and how they can be avoided. The usual advice is to first confirm the business name and then identify yourself (I’m making up the names): “Good morning. Sunny Smiles Dental Practice. Jacqui speaking and I can help you”.

The problem comes when somebody answers the telephone in this way 10, 20, 50 times a day. Before the week is out they’re answering: “G’morning. Sunny Smiles dental practice. Jacquispeak... n’Icanhelp!”

As a humorous diversion, older readers may recall the Morecambe and Wise sketch ‘Morny Stannit’. Eric plays a street newspaper seller who repeatedly calls out the name of the newspaper – “Morning Standard” over time having become “Morny Stannit”. Incidentally, the Morny Stannit is now available online: http://mornystannit.info

The caller is either obliged to ask that this be repeated or they carry on without having

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There are accepted rates of speech, measured as words per minute (wpm). Fewer than 110wpm is slow whereas conversational speech is somewhere around 150wpm or more (some experts say 180-200wpm is ideal, others consider this fast). There are free audio books available via the Internet (www.books4free.com is one website) and these can help you gauge a rate of speech that can be readily understood. You can also find rate of speech tests online. The speed of answering the telephone should be slower than normal conversation.

There are four key things to remember:

- The speed of answering the telephone should be slower than normal conversation.
- It should be a ‘smiley’ greeting (see below).
- The caller should be identified by repeating your own name and then asking the caller for theirs, eg “My name, again, is Jaquie, may I take your name please?”
- Listen to what the caller says.

Ways of giving a ‘smiley’ greeting:

- Carry on speaking clearly and naturally, without a deeper voice, Oh, and smile genuinely while you do so.

Colleagues should occasionally listen to how practice team members answer the telephone to ensure they haven’t reverted to an Olympic pace greeting! The other thing to be checked regularly is that your telephone system has good audio clarity – unless a colleague makes a trial call every so often, you may never know. They should also check that receptionists are not starting to speak before the line is properly connected – resulting in “...ternoon, Sunny Smiles Dental Practice” etc.

Finally, how does your answering message sound to callers? Check for clarity, background noise, pace of speech and good intonation.

Why have I used most of this article concentrating on just the first few seconds of a telephone call? It’s because those first seconds are critical – it is oft quoted that research shows that people form first impressions of others in just a very few seconds. Unfortunately, I can’t refer you to specific research to verify this. I can, however, give you a great reading recommendation. It’s Drop The Pink Elephant by Broadcasting Business Managing Director, Bill McFarlan. The book is about ways to speak to people without getting them focused on the opposite of what you are saying. Eg if someone says: “Don’t think about a pink elephant,” then of course, that is exactly what you think about. So, if you say: “Don’t worry, we are really good with nervous patients,” all the patient hears is that they should worry!

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