

Great Telephone Impressions Generate Great Bottom Lines



Urgent care centers are just as much a retail business as a medical treatment facility. Like all other “retailers,” urgent care thrives to the extent that loyal patients return to the center for care and tell others to do likewise. You only get one chance to make a good first impression and your staff will generate income if they generate patient good will. A well trained staff regarding telephone protocols is the first opportunity to increase your patient traffic. Although many patients will visit urgent care without first calling, those patients who do call requesting information are likely to be more informed and discerning consumers. In fact, they’re typically the “health care brokers” for themselves or family and friends—opinion leaders who can make or break your center’s reputation.

According to a [study done by the Baird Group in 2016](#), the key points of dissatisfaction when it comes to telephone interactions with medical practices are:

WAITING, RINGING AND RECORDING: Prospective patients are most satisfied when a phone call is answered within three rings by a live staff member. Voice queues are off-putting as we all know. Especially those which begin with “Please listen carefully because our menu has changed” or have no option to “zero out” and reach a live person. Be creative when striving for efficient and timely call handling. A telephone system with the ability for any staff member to take a call and have access to the practice management system with basic cross-training can allow staff other than those at the front desk to take calls when necessary and practical. Asking a caller if they can hold is wise, especially because the potential patient calling might consider their need an emergency. When returning to a held call a “sorry you had to hold” is perceived better than “thank you for holding.” Consider having medical providers take calls for 15 minutes a week. That will give them first-hand knowledge of what is involved in handling calls and will impress the administrative staff that they are willing to “work in the trenches” showing their dedication to great first impressions.

GREETING: Callers are most satisfied when the person who answers the phone identifies him/herself, the name of the clinic and offers to help the prospective patient. Develop a script, post it near the telephone, and hold staff accountable to using it—even if such entails occasional “secret shopping” to assure compliance.

COMMUNICATION: Allowing the caller to speak without being interrupted, speaking clearly and asking pertinent questions go a long way toward giving a great impression. When training new staff and retraining if necessary, role play can let your staff know how it feels to be the “patient” and get feedback from others.

APPOINTMENT ACCESS: As would be expected, a timely appointment is necessary for good will in your community. Although urgent care operates on a walk-in basis, it is valuable to be able to provide patients an estimate of wait times, number of patients in queue, or to even take the patient’s information and establish their place in line similar to call-ahead seating at popular restaurants.

CLOSING THE CALL: Just as in closing a patient visit your office staff will be perceived as helpful if they summarize the call and ask if there is anything further needed. Be sure to thank the individual for calling. And if it’s necessary to call the patient back on an unresolved question—be sure to do so in a timely manner. Otherwise the patient will likely be calling your competition for services.

LIVE OR RECORDED: It is more likely for people to have a good impression of your clinic if a live person instead of a recorded voice greets them. The income generated from good experiences for your potential patients might justify enlarging your staff to accommodate your call volume. Some multi-site urgent care operations have calls from all centers direct to a centralized location, which also frees the individual medical centers from telephone distractions.

FRIENDLINESS AND EMPATHY: We all appreciate speaking with someone whom we perceive to be sincerely interested in meeting our needs. Through role-playing, staff should come across as upbeat, enthusiastic, and eager to please. Otherwise, patients who perceive a dull, disengaged staff on the phone will likely encounter the same when they arrive at your center.

KNOWLEDGE AND RESOLUTION: People appreciate having their questions fully answered and being satisfied that they have received accurate information. Adequate training of new hires and easily understandable protocols and procedures will insure accuracy from your staff. Post driving directions near the phone and have a list of frequently asked questions that staff can refer to. Remember, there are many internet and application tools by which the public can learn about your clinic including reviews by dissatisfied patients or potential patients.

In closing, in order to make a great first impression on potential patients and their families and friends, have affirming telephone protocols in place, train your staff adequately, consider role playing sessions and potentially having your professional staff “work the trenches” occasionally. Be aware of how calls are handled by monitoring how calls are handled or ask your family or friends to be a “mystery shopper.” That will result in timely, efficient and effective telephone interactions that will ultimately increase your clinic’s productivity and bottom line.

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