



How to avoid fumbling advertising-generated inquiries at the two-yard line

While nearly anyone can handle **TELEPHONE INQUIRIES** originating from patient referrals, the game gets decidedly more difficult when prospective patients call in response to advertising. In fact, if you've lost at dental advertising previously, chances are high that at least part of the problem stemmed from the way your front desk handled the calls. You probably don't want to hear this, but *poor phone skills may have already cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost revenue.*

Here's why marketing-generated calls are different:

Someone responding to your marketing is still undecided. What happens next (on the phone) is critical to success. Without an established relationship, the caller is skeptical — mentally evaluating your practice. Your staff needs to help the caller feel that an appointment is the right thing to do.

No one told the staff that marketing is vital to the practice. Advertising callers don't think ill of your practice for "having to advertise." Advertising-generated calls will be different and more difficult than the "easy calls" the staff is used to, such as a friendly referral.

Price is only a conversation starter. It's tragically common for staff to regard "price shoppers" as deadbeats, and no loss if they go elsewhere. The fact is that patients don't know any other way to shop for dental services; they assume cost is the only differentiating factor. Scripts, role-playing, and practice are needed to bring the new patient into the office.

Untrained staff hates these calls. This added "phone burden" interrupts the office routine. (Hopefully, you'll come to your senses and stop advertising.) It's not uncommon to hear that "no one called," or there was "nothing but a bunch of shoppers."

If this sounds familiar, invite a "secret shopper" to call and rate his or her experience on feeling comfortable, welcome, and cared about during the first conversation. Include sales skills and the ability to motivate prospective new patients to make and keep initial appointments. The alternative? Poor phone skills result in lost revenues ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. The real issue is what to do.

How to win on the phone

❶ **Get the right person.** In many dental practices, employees with primary phone responsibilities are the lowest-paid and least tenured and experienced. Or perhaps phones are answered by staff with ingrained bad phone habits. Or

maybe "getting the phone" is a shared function and a last priority for everyone.

A critical point: The folks who answer the phones are your front-line public relations and first-impression representatives. Hire based on *friendliness, verbal skills, listening skills,* and *sales skills.* If you have to make a choice, sales experience and a friendly voice trump years of experience in the profession.

❷ **Winning compensation formulas.** Don't compromise in your quest for good talent. You may not always get what you pay for, but you definitely don't get what you don't pay for. Consider a win-win incentive formula — perhaps a bonus tied to increased new-patient volume, matched against patient satisfaction scores.

❸ **Stay on target.** Requiring massive multitasking from your front-office staff is usually counterproductive. You are probably costing yourself thousands in lost business due to subpar phone communications from overtasked employees. It is you who lose — patients on hold too long, abrupt, rushed conversations, and lost business.

❹ **Scripting and training.** Done right, an effective phone script is not a restrictive device. It's a series of "best answers" to frequently asked questions. Your staff should participate in the scripting process — they're on the front lines, plus they buy into the value of using what they helped create. Schedule training and periodic refreshers. At a minimum, scripting and guidelines should be refreshed, updated, and retrained at least twice a year.

Do the math.

The odds are that your dental practice is losing business. If poor phone skills chase away only one new case or patient each week on average, how much revenue never makes it into the practice? Install the tools so that each time the phone rings, your dental marketing effort begins with a smile and your team is playing to win in the Marketing Red Zone. **DE**

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