

Have Receptionists Speak With Confidence

Refresh phone skills to deliver five-star service daily

By Wendy S. Myers

When I dialed a clinic for a conference call with two practice owners, the receptionist answered after four rings. She hurriedly stated the hospital's name and asked "How can I help you?" What I heard was an attitude of "What do you want?"



Too often, callers are treated as an interruption to an already busy day. Our consulting firm has called more than 1,600 receptionists for our Mystery Phone Shopper Training Program. While many hospitals strive to distinguish their businesses on service, the national average is two of five stars—below average. Among 1,600 phone conversations, only 1% of receptionists

delivered five stars compared to 61% who scored two.

Here are refreshers to coach your front-office team on delivering stellar service over the phone:

Slow down. Oftentimes greetings are so rapid fire that it's hard to understand the name of the business or team member. A great greeting would include, *"Thank you for calling Myers Veterinary Hospital. This is Wendy. How may I help you?"*

Even though receptionists repeat the greeting hundreds of times each day, it creates a first impression with callers every time. Let clients hear the smile in your voice and eagerness to help. Slow down and enunciate your words rather than sounding like you've just finished a triple espresso.

Ask permission before putting callers on hold. Always wait for the answer. When you have multiple lines ringing, you might say, *"Thank you for calling Myers Veterinary Hospital. This is Wendy. Is this a medical emergency, or are you able to hold for a moment while I finish helping another client?"*

A caller with an emergency will need immediate assistance. But a client requesting a prescription refill should be able to briefly hold. If it will take several minutes to pull a record or

consult with a doctor, ask the caller if she can hold or would prefer a returned call. Say, “*Are you able to hold for a moment while I get your pet’s medical record, or would you prefer that I call you back? It will take me a few minutes to get that information for you.*”



When you’re helping a client at the front desk and the phone rings, you want the client and caller to feel equally important. Say to the visiting client, “*Mrs. Jones, will you please excuse me for a moment while I place this caller on hold so I can keep helping you?*” Then answer the phone, “*Thank you for calling Myers Veterinary Hospital. This is Wendy. Is this a medical emergency, or are you able to hold for a moment while I finish checking out another client? I will be with you as quickly as possible.*”

Help clients prepare for wellness exams with confirmation calls. To improve compliance for intestinal parasite testing, have receptionists remind clients to bring stool samples with them to their appointments. Also ask clients to bring all medications they’re currently giving their pets. This will identify “extra” doses of preventatives and self-prescribed drugs the client may be giving such as aspirin and supplements.

Here is a script your front-office team can follow: “*This is Wendy calling from Myers Veterinary Hospital to confirm your appointment for Jessup with Dr. Myers tomorrow, beginning at 10:20 a.m. Please remember to bring a teaspoon-sized stool sample that is fresh within X hours. Also bring any medications and supplements you’re currently giving your pet with you to your appointment. We look forward to seeing you and Jessup tomorrow at 10:20 a.m. If you have questions or need to reschedule your appointment, please call us at 555-555-5555.*”

Keep personal conversations private. Remember that phones in the lobby are in public areas. Clients will overhear every conversation. As a consultant, I’ve witnessed a receptionist yelling at her kids over the phone and other inappropriate etiquette. Clients might have a negative reaction based on eavesdropped conversations.

If you need to talk with an upset caller, go to a private place such as a manager’s or doctors’ offices. Ask the caller, “*Are you able to hold for a moment while I move to another phone where you can have my full attention and we can find a solution together?*” The caller likely overhears barking dogs, ringing phones, and the traffic in your lobby so she will appreciate your complete focus on her concerns.

Wrap up conversations politely with chatty clients. Some pet owners go into detailed descriptions of their pets' symptoms when scheduling an appointment. Others see you as a friend and simply want to chat. Find a balance between a conversation that lets you be efficient while also making the client feel she has the attention of a best friend.

To politely wrap up a lengthy conversation, listen for the caller to take a breath and interrupt with, *"Mrs. Smith, we look forward to seeing you and Princess for your appointment on Friday. Let me repeat the two problems she's having so I can note that for the doctor and finish booking your appointment."* The word "finish" subtly tells the caller your conversation is complete. If she continues to ramble, say *"Mrs. Smith, it was great talking to you. We'll see you and Princess next Friday at 2:00 pm for your appointment. I have another client I need to help now, so it was great hearing from you. Good-bye."*



Be firm when callers forget their manners. If a client curses, don't tolerate this bad behavior. Foul language is disrespectful and will only lead to hurt feelings. Counter the f-bomb with *"If I hear that language again, I won't be able to help you. Unless we can find a different way to communicate so we can find a solution together, I am going to hang up."*

"Language" is a neutral word compared to the defensive reaction you may get from "If you don't stop cursing." Explaining that you want to find a solution tells the irate caller you'll fix the problem. Lastly, communicating the consequence of "I'm going to hang up" tells the caller you won't tolerate abusive language.

If the conversation continues in the same volatile tone, hang up but announce it first. Remember, the caller can't see you and will just call back screaming louder if all he hears is "click." Instead, say *"I'm sorry that we are unable to better communicate. I am going to hang up now."*

Always take the high road and act like a professional. With compassionate conversations, clients will appreciate your attention to good service.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.