



How to Answer the Telephone Mini Series

Session 2: Delivering a better
experience on the phone through well
trained people – the how to do!

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The recent webinar was the second of a series of three concerning the crucial role of the telephone in veterinary practice:

1. Understanding the critical importance of the phone
2. Delivering a better telephone experience
3. Changing and evolving practice culture to maintain good telephone practise

2. Delivering a better telephone experience

Veterinary business model

You will remember that last time we discussed some basic principles of veterinary business. Regardless of the type and size of practice, the same veterinary model applies - each business must follow a series of five steps in order for the practice to grow:

1. Make the phone ring
2. Convert the caller into a paying client
3. Convert the consultation into further treatment and care
4. Charge correctly and fairly for all work done
5. Get recommended (which in turn makes the phone ring...)

Total call volume is comprised of inbound and outbound calls

Inbound calls might be unsolicited price checks, requests for appointments, calls asking for advice and so on - the number of these might be influenced by the time of day, day of the week or driven by any recent practice marketing.

Outbound calls are made by the practice team - notifying test results, reminding clients about vaccinations due or giving updates on hospitalised animals for example.

The timing of outbound calls often occurs at some key times when clients are trying to call in - resulting in engaged lines and frustrated, angry clients. Which ultimately means lost business and goodwill.

The ratio of inbound to outbound calls is very interesting - it is a very good indicator of the wider customer experience at your practice. When outbound calls are not significantly fewer in number than inbound calls, clients see that the practice is proactive and caring, and they feel more bonded and loyal to it.

Deconstructing an incoming call

Think about the caller:

- Who are they?
- What do they want?
- What do they need to hear?
- What do you need them to do?

Remember Mehrabian's communication model from last time? Without face-to-face contact we lose 55% of the caller's message. Which means that we need to practise 'active listening':

- Paraphrasing the caller
- Repeating their words
- Clarifying what they need
- Summarise to check your understanding

The Five Steps to fantastic customer service over the telephone:

1. Give a great greeting
2. Ask and use the pet's or horse's name
3. Show some love – value for money, not just price
4. Give more information - direct callers to the web, Facebook
5. Offer an appointment: what, when?

1. Give a great greeting

The owner's needs at this stage are to:

- Know that they have got through to the right place (use the practice name)
- Hear a caring voice (use your own name)
- Hear a clear voice (don't chew gum, chat to colleagues or do other things whilst on the phone)
- Feel warmth (ask about the animal, use its name)
- Feel that they are being heard and understood (repeat and summarise)
- Know that the health and wellbeing of their pet or horse really matters to your practice

Say "Good morning / afternoon / evening" and keep your tone bright and friendly.

Don't speak too quickly or mumble.

Agree a practice standard greeting, and make sure everyone uses it, every time.

The caller needs to know that they are speaking with a human who cares about the animal, not an automaton paid to efficiently process calls.

2. Ask and use the pet's or horse's name

Keep a pen and paper near the phone to jot down names.

Listen for the owner's mood - are they sad, happy, worried, angry?

With this information you can personalise the call - use the animal's name naturally throughout the call.

3. Show some love – value for money, not just price

Demonstrate an emotional connection before discussing money - ask about the animal by name.

Onswitch research shows that as few as 10% of owners are motivated primarily by price - the other 90% want to feel an emotional connection with the practice, to justify the cost.

Think about the caller and make it easy for her - she has a busy life, so if you can offer appointments in the evenings or weekends, this will be a big plus for her.

When calls are about sick animals it is important to reflect the owner's mood - "I can hear that you are worried about Luna." Make recommendations for action "I know the vet would want to see her, I recommend making an appointment for today"

In emergencies it's important to help the owner by being decisive - act fast and communicate clearly. Give precise information about getting to the practice (maps on the website, postcode for sat. nav. etc.)

4. Give more information - direct callers to the web, Facebook

Provide more details after the caller has put the phone down - direct them to your website, ask for an email address to send information through.

Thank the caller for choosing you and offer to send a new client welcome pack, either by post or via email

5. Offer an appointment: what, when?

This step is crucial - they called you, they have a specific need that you can address - so offer to see them!

Use open questions that are harder for the caller to say no to (what, when and how):

- "When would be a good time for you to bring Luna in?"
- "Which of our branches would you prefer to visit?"

Call conversion is critical

By demonstrating real interest and empathy, you show that your practice delivers the best care for the caller's beloved pet or horse. They will want to choose you.

Owners have choices - if you can't show that you can meet their needs, others will.

Win more owners by focusing on call management - make calls proactively and ensure that there are sufficient lines and staff available for busy periods.

Make the phone matter - measure and track performance. Set goals.

Change can be hard, but persevere - the rewards are great when you put the customer experience at the heart of everything you do.

Next time the webinar on March 19th will look at creating a positive phone culture.

Before that you'll need to do some **homework**:

- Practise the 5 steps
- Write your own "Best Practise" 5 steps
- Coach a colleague on the 5 steps
- Listen to some calls and mark against the 5 steps
- Make some secret calls to other vets and mark against 5 steps