



How to Answer the Telephone Mini Series

**Session 1: Understanding the critical
importance of the phone in any vet
practice**

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The recent webinar was the first 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

1. Understanding the critical importance of the phone.

Veterinary business model

Regardless of the type and size of practice, the same veterinary business 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...)

It's important to acknowledge that the customer experience really matters to your business - owners assume high levels of clinical competence at every practice, but how you treat *them* really counts, and sets you apart from your competitors.

Who is your customer?

Understanding who your typical customer is helps you tailor your service accordingly:

- A third of UK pet owners are aged 25-34 years
- A quarter of owners use more than one practice
- Recommendation is the main way in which owners choose a vet
- Three quarters of owners live within five miles of their practice
- Owners are not with you for life - they may move house or lose their animal, but they are also equally likely to follow a favourite vet who moves to another practice, try out a new practice in the town or switch practices on the recommendation of their friends and family
- Cost is relatively unimportant - fewer than 10% of owners make their decisions primarily on price
- Owners look online and ask advice from friends, family or other animal care professionals (groomers, farriers, pet shops, feed merchants, rescue centres etc.)
- Owners make choices based on value for money - when your service is excellent it justifies the cost

So owners are making choices that are informed by their emotions - assessing how a practice 'feels'. Customer care is more likely to win or lose you clients than your clinical care.

How is the telephone call used?

We looked at call numbers and patterns at a typical practice.

- Call volumes peak on Monday mornings and tail off through the week - owners do their research over the weekend and call several practices on Monday morning to compare advice!
- Two thirds of new calls are generated by online searches
- On average, a 1-vet small animal practice will receive 1,000 inbound calls every month (400 for equine practice)
- Owners will call several practices and assess not only the advice given, but the way in which it was imparted and the level of involvement and engagement they felt

Communication models

The telephone is a key source of primary contact with a practice, but without the benefit of face-to-face communication, many elements of the conversation are lost.

Mehrabian's well-respected model identified exactly how this contact breaks down:

- Just 7% of the message is communicated via the actual words spoken
- 38% is determined by the tone of voice
- A massive 55% comes from body language and facial expression.

Clearly this final aspect is entirely missing from a telephone call and so we must work hard to substitute this in the way we speak to and engage with callers.

We can do this with active listening:

- Paraphrasing the owner's question or concern
- Repeating their words back to them
- Clarifying what they need
- Summarising advice and recommendations

Converting calls

Through recommendation and effective marketing, you have generated an inbound call - a potential new client.

Creating a return on this investment requires you to demonstrate that your service will exceed their expectations and needs (*not* just wants).

"I want the price of a dental" but "you need a visit from the vet in order to assess your horse's general health and determine the most appropriate care and treatment"

Many owners will call several practices for prices on 'shoppable' items such as: vaccinations, dental work and visits. After all the research and time they have invested to find your number, the least you should be doing is offering to see them - so many practices do not!

The Onswitch Index reports monthly on telephone customer care across the UK, at both small animal and equine practices. The target is for appointments to be offered to every caller, every time, and in this way to convert 80% of calls into paid-for consults.

The Index is the only accurate and reliable method by which to measure the customer experience at your practice, and track changes over time. This data allows Index practices to set benchmarks and targets, because what gets measured, gets better. It leads to an improvement in the customer experience, which goes hand in hand with increased footfall and turnover.

Good telephone practise = good business

Next time the webinar will look at the call process - what to say, and how to say it. Before that you'll need to do some **pre-work**, and find out:

- How many calls does your practice receive each month?
- When are the peak times?
- Look at your website statistics with Google analytics - where is your site traffic coming from?
- Analyse your Facebook statistics - who is your customer base?
- What is your mystery caller Index score?