

Reaping the benefits of modern telephony

Practice phone systems are about far more than arranging appointments, says **Geraldine Taggart-Jeewa** – efficient call handling can vastly improve patients' perception of your surgery ...



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Geraldine began her career in practice management in 2003. In the past 12 months she has been involved in a successful bid for a new primary care access centre, incorporating minor injuries, general practice and out-of-hours services. Geraldine combines working at North Meols Medical Centre with helping to deliver study days to all practices across Central Lancashire and being the treasurer of the local PBC Consortium. She is married and has four children

Resource

NHS Practice Management Network:
Improving access, responding to patients

This guide will help you understand your current telephone system and make a decision about investing in a new system or upgrading your existing one.

www.practicemanagement.org.uk/telephony

How up-to-date is your practice telephony system? For instance, when the phone rings, are you aware of who is calling? Do you know how many patients are waiting to be answered? Do you know the calling habits of your patients or how many calls you missed in the past week? Is your telephone system integrated with your computer? These are questions you may or may not have considered.

Telephony involves personalised customer care and is key to patient access and managing demand in general practice.

Survey results

In November, *Management in Practice* ran an online snapshot survey to find out more about how practice managers use telephony and to gauge whether general practice is keeping in touch with the developments in the IT and telecom industry.

The results show that only 43% of surveyed practices use Caller ID display, which enables personalised interaction with patients. Only 30% of respondents integrated telephony with their practice computer system – this functionality is crucial for being able to integrate calls with your computer database and route them to the most appropriate person (also known as automatic call distribution). And only just over 30% gather performance data that help to assess peak times and manage demand.

Some areas show a higher uptake, however. More than 50% have an interactive voice response – eg, pre-recorded messages such as swine-flu information – and almost 65% offer call management, allowing practices to put callers on hold, transfer calls and offer call waiting.

Patient perception

Negative phone experiences often cited by patients calling their GP surgery include:

- Frequently getting an engaged tone.
- A ringing phone that no one answers.

- Going through to an answering machine rather than to practice staff.
- A telephone system that has a complex variety of options.

Your telephone system is often the first point of contact that a patient has with your practice. This system can enhance the patient experience or disrupt it. Colleagues may want to consider whether to keep their current system, enhance the service offered already or, more radically, consider a totally new system.

Issues to consider

Cost is of course crucial. However, sticking with your current system could be a false economy if you think it's always expensive. Evaluating your current system and the benefits of any alterations is key and may provide some valuable information to help colleagues and practices decide the best way forward.

The new system might enable you to better meet demand and offer value for money, and so could actually save you a lot of time and money. Some of the add-ons and software are available for very little cost.

If you do decide to upgrade, take time to design and develop the new system. Manage implementation of the new system to minimise disturbance to services. This can be overcome through planning, help from colleagues who have already implemented new systems, telephony providers themselves and through expertise already held within the local primary care trust (PCT).

Top telephony tips

- Do market research, talk to other practice managers and make an informed decision.
- Shop around – if you are tied into a contract, negotiate and bargain.
- A lot of add-ons and software applications are widely available – speak to your provider.
- Check if the PCT will provide advice and contact details of telephony providers. ■