On-Hold Essentials

5 Mistakes to Avoid When Putting Patients On Hold

It’s inevitable. Despite the best intentions of a busy practice, some callers will have to be placed on hold. Though it is an inconvenience, it is possible for patients to have a positive experience while waiting to speak with your office. Just think about how on-hold time can be leveraged to benefit your practice. For one thing, it is a great opportunity to display your patient service skills. On-hold time can also educate patients about your practice and services offered. But despite its potential, one small error can create a major obstacle to meeting a patient’s needs. To help you satisfy patients and make the most of on-hold time, try to avoid making these five common mistakes.

1. **NOT ASKING PERMISSION**
   Placing a caller on hold without first asking their permission is one of the most costly errors in customer service. And it’s such an easy thing to do. Obtaining patient permission before putting them on hold is a simple yet effective way to show that patient service is your primary concern. Patients will appreciate the courtesy and find themselves more likely to continue visiting the practice.

2. **LENGTHY ON-HOLD TIMES**
   Although this may seem like an obvious mistake to avoid, lengthy on-hold times are still a significant barrier to patient communication. In a CNN survey, it was noted that the average person spends 60 hours per year on hold. Each patient’s time is valuable, and they are certainly looking for a quick resolution to their question or request. Not only do long periods of on-hold time test the patience of callers, but they can also make your office appear to be unknowledgeable and disorganized. If it is necessary to keep a patient waiting, it is always a good idea to check in with the caller frequently if possible. They will appreciate your attention and updates and see that patient care is a top priority of the practice.

3. **ABSOLUTE SILENCE**
   Silence on hold only makes the wait seem longer than it actually is. Entertainment is a must. Providing listening material to callers helps ensure that they will still be present on the line when you return to the call. CNN found that without music or messages, 70% of callers on hold will hang up and 35% will not call back. The North American Telecommunications Association reported that callers with silence on hold often abandon their calls in less than one minute, and 90% hang up within 40 seconds. Callers listening to information while waiting will remain on the line for up to three minutes longer.

4. **TURNING ON THE RADIO**
   While having callers listen to the radio may seem like a simple solution for on-hold entertainment, it makes your practice susceptible to a number of uncontrollable outside factors. Although radio is heavily regulated, on-air personalities, programs and music may feature inappropriate language that could be offensive to a caller. And whether or not the patient takes exception to the questionable content, it’s likely that this is not the image your practice will want to portray. Another (and possibly more dangerous) threat exists when patients hear the radio while on hold: your competition. If a competing practice runs an advertisement on your on-hold station, the advantages of on-hold marketing will work against you. The caller will hear a competitor’s message loud and clear. Though it is a quick and easy form of entertainment, radio is something a practice should not risk.

5. **RELYING ON MUSIC ALONE**
   Providing music for callers on hold seems safe enough, right? Consider this: Having callers listen to music alone may free your practice from the risk of radio and its competing messages, but it still results in a missed opportunity. On-hold callers are one of the most captive audiences your practice will ever have, especially when they hear a person’s voice on the other end of the line. On-hold time is the perfect forum for a friendly voice from your practice to deliver important information. Patients will enjoy hearing content including the types of service you offer, holiday greetings and doctor biographies. This information can still feature background music, but with the addition of practice-specific content, a patient’s on-hold time is now both entertaining and educational.