

A Great Answering Service Can Improve a Medical Practice's Bottom Line

By D. E. Murray



With rapidly improving diagnostic technologies, physicians are continually challenged to learn more and do more. Patient care may be technically improved as a result, insurance companies and third party administrators may be made happy by their efforts, and the care team may take pride in efficient and effective medical treatment. However, patients may often feel as if they are only a small part of a thoroughly mechanized, automated, and impersonal process. Too often, they are right.

Studies have shown that medical litigation

is greatly influenced by a patient's relationship with their physician. The more a patient feels they have been heard and can share their concerns with their physician, the less likely that patient is to sue – even when the physician has made an error.

In the United States, medicine is practiced in a team environment. The physician is typically in charge of the team, which often includes physician's assistants, nurses, aides, technicians, and front office staff – as well as the practice's telephone answering service. As the practice's primary ambassador after-hours,

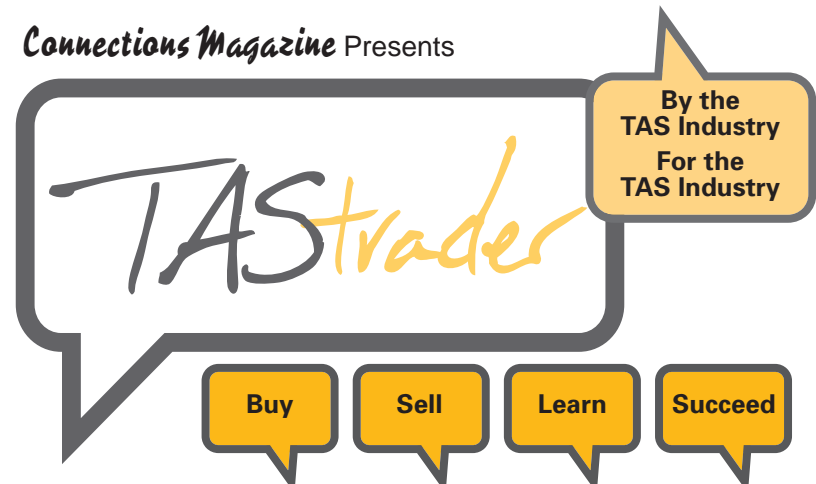
patients may associate a poor answering service with substandard care if calls are mishandled. Conversely, an outstanding answering service will project a practice's focus on patient care and professionalism 24/7.

"A great answering service may greatly

assist the patient/physician interface, improve and solidify patient relationships, and add to the practice's bottom line. If your answering service is merely serving as a voicemail system with a live operator, you are missing the

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A Great Answering Service

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boat,” stated Nancy Duncan of On Ramp Medical Communications. “Beyond the crucial after-hours interface with patients, a great answering service can add to office profits, patient satisfaction, and retention by providing appointment reminders, surgery or appointment cancellations, Rx refill information, and patient surveys.”

A great telephone answering service knows that they are an extension of their client’s practice. Therefore, answering service training should include both initial and ongoing instruction with a focus on patient service and client profiles. A great service will utilize current and upgraded software and hardware with backup capability in the event

of power failure, severe weather, or disaster. A great answering service will regularly communicate with their clients, keeping them abreast of opportunities to improve patient communication during and after office hours, thus increasing office profitability.

“At the end of the day, a great answering service recognizes their importance to the patient care equation, understands that they are an extension of the medical practice, adds to the practice’s bottom line, and delivers professionalism and value far beyond the expectations of the practice,” continued Duncan. “An answering service does more than just answer patients’ calls; their influence on patient satisfaction is enormous.”

D. E. Murray is a freelance writer residing in Florida

Seasonal Traffic Opportunities

By Peter DeHaan

As a publisher, December is a slower time of the year for me. It’s not that I have less work to do, but I have fewer interruptions in the form of ancillary email messages and phone calls. Conversely, for most answering services, the winter holidays present the opposite scenario, with the days leading up to Christmas being busier – and for some services, significantly busier. The amount of increase in December call volume varies by region and client mix. While some call centers see little change in call volume during the winter months, most see an increase.

In cases where the increase is moderate, it is handled using existing staff, with operators working more hours and additional shifts or former operators being pulled in from other departments. The goal is to not increase the employee count if possible and to avoid having to let people go when the holiday rush is over.

For answering services with a greater influx of calls – such as those that also do some order taking – existing staff is often inadequate to cover the projected traffic. In these instances, temporary staff is needed. Although hiring temporary holiday staff – be it directly or indirectly through a staffing agency – is daunting and draining, there is an upside. These short-term workers give the answering service an opportunity to evaluate their skill and effectiveness, picking out the best for possible permanent status come January. This may be the ultimate agent-screening tool, one that produces the best possible evaluation.

Regardless of which category your answering services fits into – whether you

see a slight increase, a moderate bump, or a big jump – one thing can be expected: January should be a slower month, requiring fewer hours on the schedule. Moreover, this year things are compounded by worries over the economy and wonderings of how much longer the recession will last.

With this as the backdrop, I offer the following considerations for January:

- Staff morale will become an even bigger issue. In December, the goal was to keep staff motivated amid an increase in calls, complaints, and fatigue, whereas in January, the need is to keep morale up in the face of reduced hours, fewer shifts, and possible terminations for temporary staff or even layoffs for permanent staff. Even though things have slowed down, morale is still an issue that can’t be overlooked.
- Slower times are a great opportunity to renew quality initiatives and provide additional training. Side-by-side coaching and silent monitoring can once again be given the attention and priority they deserve.
- When hours need to be cut, the weaker staff should bear the brunt of it. Some operators may not have what it takes to provide the quality service that you seek, while others might have given up trying and are merely coasting. Terminating the obviously weaker agents sends a powerful message to stronger agents that their good work is noticed and appreciated.

A slower January is not a time for either fear or relaxing but a time of opportunity; don’t miss it.

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TAS Trader Goes Monthly

Starting in 2010, *TAS Trader* will be published monthly and distributed the first Thursday of each month. Launched in April 2009, *TAS Trader* was initially a bimonthly e-publication. In addition to the premier issue in April, there were four other issues in 2009: June, August, October, and December. All of these issues are archived online at www.tastrader.com/issues/index.html. There are currently 3,000 subscribers to *TAS Trader*, which covers the telephone answering service industry.

STA Webinars

The Southern Telemessaging Association (STA) has announced a series of educational Webinars for the first quarter of 2010. The first is a representation of their

well-received December 10th Webinar entitled "Customer Service." It will be offered on January 7th. Part 2 of "Customer Service" will be held on January 21st. On February 25th, the Webinar will focus on the "Supervisor's Role in Customer Service," followed by "CSR Training, Coaching, and Evaluating Customer Service" on March 18th. All Webinars will be held at 1:00 pm CST. For more information or to register, go to www.sta-assoc.org/calendar.html.

Amtelco Users Meet in Newport Beach, CA, for 2010 Conference

The National Amtelco Equipment Owners 2010 Conference will be held in Newport Beach, California, March 21 to 25 at the Newport Beach Marriott Hotel. Amtelco

and NAEO will provide in-depth educational presentations during the conference, and Amtelco will announce major software and hardware innovations. Kevin Beale, Amtelco's director of research and development software, will present new releases designed to add new services and increase profits for answering services. For more information, contact Amtelco at 800-356-9148 or email info@amtelco.com.

OnviSource Announces OnviCare Customer Lifecycle Assistance Services

OnviSource announced a new suite of customer-centric services called OnviCare Lifecycle Assistance Services, which expands its support programs by offering solutions

beyond technical support. It include free OnviCenter product pilots and trials, assistance in financing and procurement, free telecom audit and consulting, IT assistance, business and operations continuity programs, user communities, and dissemination of business intelligence. It also includes free training Webinars in best practices and customer-tailored programs. "We've become a more proactive partner with our customers," Stan Jasinski, president of the enterprise solutions division, concluded.

Amtelco Receives Patent for Dynamically Creating Records

Amtelco received a U.S. patent for "A System and Method for Dynamically
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Creating Records.” It encompasses a script that pulls information from a database using a dynamic link, such as automatically entering a patient’s address when the operator enters the patient identification number. Working in the opposite direction, the process can also add information to a database using a dynamic link. Creating “contact databases as operators take calls offers unlimited potential,” said Amtelco president Tom Curtin. This is the twenty-eighth patent received through Amtelco, beginning with the first patent in 1954.

TAS Trader Adds Convention Schedules Online

Telephone answering service conventions, meetings, and events are now being posted online and given their own link: <http://updates.tastrader.com/categories/UpcomingEvents.aspx>. You can bookmark this link for quick and easy access to all TAS industry events. You can also bookmark the main link, <http://updates.tastrader.com>, "subscribe" to be notified of updates, or use one of the news feed options to see all postings.

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