



## The Ol' Telephone Game

By Mary E. Schmidt, ABOC, CPO

You remember that game. You begin in a circle, the first person whispers something in the ear of the person sitting next to them, the second person repeats it to the third, the third to the fourth and so on. By the time the message reaches the last person in the circle, most often, the message is completely different.

When is the last time the front desk team had any training on what to communicate to a patient on the phone? If it's been more than a few months, it may be time to begin the game again.

I'm writing this article because of something I experienced recently. I was asked to find an Optometrist for a friend of mine, in a town where I didn't know any of the doctors. Instead of working the network of doctors I know to find a local colleague, I thought I'd call practices and pose as a new patient, relocating to the area, and looking for a doctor for my husband, who has a complicated prescription.

What do you suppose was the first question I was asked each and every time? Possibly a friendly, rapport building, "Welcome to the area, where are you relocating from?" Nope. How about, "Can you tell me a little more about your husband's vision needs?" thus creating a bond and allowing for an assessment of the patient need in order to book an appropriate time slot? No again. Maybe even a "When was the last time your husband had a comprehensive eye exam?" Unfortunately, no again.

The first response from each staff member was "What type of insurance do you have?" Do you agree with that response? Some suggest that it is more time expedient to ask that question so as not to waste time with shoppers who won't become patients. But expediency is not what is called for at this moment. This is the initial impression most patients have of your practice, you have 5-7 seconds to make a power impact, and the practice's marketing team is at the front desk!

If you want to attract new patients and fill more appointment slots, try this strategy: You have 30 seconds to communicate to stranger at a party, three unique attributes about your practice, what would you say? Think about it carefully and make it good; people have about a five second attention span. Now, communicate that to your team!

Then, train them, practice with them, give them TONS of positive reinforcement, reward a job well done, create a contest (How many patients mention the front desk experience to you?). Avoid being critical, it demotivates more than it motivates.

It might be helpful to use the services of a company that will 'secret shop' your staff. They place a phone call posing as a patient, ask a series of questions and report on the experience. Some even record the conversation, so you will have a better understanding of your staff's behavior and performance on the phone, and the staff member will hear how they sound to patients. This is a powerful tool and can confirm your staff is doing a great job, and you can reinforce how much you value them. Or you have a lot of work and training time ahead of you.

The front desk staff must be stellar in order to capture the patient and keep that connection. I encourage you to invest in and highly value your front desk person. They should not be the newest staff member, or the lowest paid. When I hear, "I'm JUST the receptionist." I stop and let the person know they are command-central in the practice; the efficiency of the practice and the satisfaction of each patient rest with them.

Do you communicate to your front desk staff just how much they mean to the growth and financial health of your practice? Encourage them to make a difference to patients coming through that door. The first statement should not be "Do you have your vision insurance card? Medical insurance card?" How about "Hi, how are you today? Welcome to the office, I'm Mary, we spoke on the phone." (You can accomplish this feat by initialing who schedules the appointment.)

In the end, I scheduled the appointment for my friend with the practice that had the most knowledgeable staff and that tried their best to answer my questions. When I saw my friend recently, both he and his wife had exams, purchased freeform progressives, great frames, sunglasses and contact lenses. All that revenue was generated from a simple phone call. But most importantly, they were please and impressed with the quality care they received.