




# 10 tips


## to design a healthcare phone system

Having spent decades in an industry that manages how people connect, communicate with each other through the technology of modern phone systems, we've developed an academic-level expertise on the simple things that offices can give patients a better phone experience.

Here are my 10 tips to help many more doctors' offices improve the quality of patient care with changes to how they handle phone calls – from team training to technology:


**01** → **Use Your Team Wisely:** Make sure the patient calling in by phone can get a live person easily. 

**The reasons for this are something we all know as a consumer:** When the service is personal, we usually feel more comfortable talking to a human to help handle our needs. With healthcare being the most personal of all services, it's a basic tenet that callers are going to want to talk to someone. It's not critical you answer every call with a live voice on the first ring but it's imperative that a patient can access a warm voice easily.

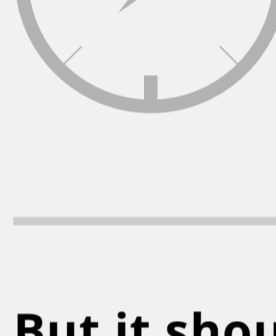
 **Give Options:** Use a menu, but do it right. ← **02**

**For most offices, the decision to use a menu is mainly a function of how busy the office is.** The more providers, the more patients, the more general the practice is, the more likely you will choose to use a menu. And you will undoubtedly learn, providing callers a menu is a great way to help improve the efficiency of your office. The challenge here is to do it in a way that makes your patients feel well served by having a menu than not.


- Consider these options:**
- 1 Have it professionally recorded.
  - 2 Keep it focused. Avoid using all 9 options unless you have to.
  - 3 Provide an option for patients to get your fax number, office hours, address, directions, a general email address, and names of physicians.
  - 4 Give an option at the end to repeat the menu, or repeat it automatically.
  - 5 Change up your menus for office hours and after hours.
  - 6 And most importantly, give an option for callers to get a live person quickly

**03** → **Be Original:** Music on Hold. 


**If you are like me you wonder if there are only two or three music-on-hold tracks that play in about 90% of all offices in the country.** Which brings me to the one rule we have with music-on-hold is this: it can't offend anyone. We like to make sure the music-on-hold is not just pleasant, but that it has the right personality for your office. Think of a few songs that you like that fit that bill or browse around the web listening to things you think are a good match. Maybe pick 2 or 3 tracks and have the best selections cut out and blended together with the other tracks. It's a good idea to adjust audio volume by "fading" between songs to avoid any odd sounding changes.

 **Use Time Wisely:** Consider a message on hold. ← **04**


**But it should be professional and give information the patient wants to hear, not just a promo about something you are selling.** The main guideline here is if you choose to have some marketing messages, mix it up with something more benign or something interesting about your office. Perhaps the background of the doctor and something unique about the office. Upcoming events and news items are great, but it requires more management to keep the information fresh. If you do choose to include marketing and promotions, avoid anything too heavy handed to keep the patient-experience fresh and the main focus.

**05** → **Consistency is Comforting:** Use an "approved" answer phrase when a phone is answered live. 


**Train staff to use the phrase consistently and remind them of the importance of answering professionally and politely.** A good way to underscore the importance of answering the phone properly is to point out that the call they answer may be the only call that patient makes that day, especially if they are elderly. While your staff will undoubtedly answer dozens of calls in a day, the experience the patient has is substantially affected by the way the front desk staff sounds on the phone.

 **Non-Emergency Choices:** If you use an answering service after hours, give your patients an option to leave a voice message on your office phone system if it is not urgent. ← **06**


**It is becoming much more accepted and preferred to leave a confidential message than talking to someone at an answering service.** Plus answering service staff should be reserved for what you really have them for: Urgent calls. This will also keep your answering service bill low, as most services charge by the amount of time they are on the phone or by the number of calls they take. Plus it avoids the occasional late night mistake of calling the on-call doctor for something that was not urgent.

**07** → **Communication is Key:** Use high quality desk phones. Don't go cheap – quality matters. 

**There are dozens of phone manufacturers on the market and the quality and features vary quite a bit.** Given the fact that your front desk staff are on the phone so much, the additional cost of getting the highest quality phone with the most appropriate features is minimal when factored in over the life of the phone. Most service providers offer good financing options for new phones, so if you want to avoid large capital outlay, consider a lease option on a good phone.

 **Script it:** Have a standard format and script layout for staff greetings on voicemail boxes. ← **08**

**Make it cheerful yet professional.** Print the script out so staff have it readily available if they need to change their own greeting. After a staff records a new greeting, have it reviewed by a manager to make sure it is consistent with other greetings in the office. Phrases associated with common courtesy go along way to cement your reputation as a caring office with good service.

**09** → **Move Ahead of Standard:** Implement advanced call handling features. 

**Call Park Orbit, Direct Call Pickup, Ring Groups, and Intercoms can help improve patient experience by reducing the time it takes for them to be served.** It is also great for staff efficiency, so these can be a win-win when implemented properly and used appropriately. Training on these is minimal, but the improvement to the patient experience is high.

 **Check in:** Call your phone once in a while. ← **10**

**Try it for yourself and see how it sounds and flows.** Encourage management to do the same. Make changes accordingly and don't be afraid to try new things and see how patients respond.

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