



# Making the call

No practice can afford to lose a new patient. Here **Laura Horton** explains the importance of how the initial new patient enquiry telephone call is handled

Have you telephoned your practice lately? If not, ring now. How was the phone answered? Were you listening to endless ringing before your team answered? Did they tell you who you were speaking to, or did you have to guess if you didn't instantly recognise their voice?

I advise you to call your practice regularly, even if you are in the surgery, to see how well your team are doing.

Ask yourself how much the average new patient is worth to the practice. The answer will depend on the types of treatment that you are marketing. If you are currently advertising teeth whitening then you will be looking at an average of £300 per patient. If you are advertising Invisalign then you will be looking at an average spend of £3,000 per new patient.

## A two-ring policy

My recommendation is always to implement a 'two-ring' policy in the practice. No matter what, the phone has to be answered by the second ring – no excuses. This is the first impression that the new patient has of the practice. All consumers expect the telephone to be answered within three rings so make yourself stand out immediately – ensure your team pick the phone up within two rings!

I am always asked by front desk, 'what if I am with a patient and the phone rings?'. My answer is that the patient you are with can see that you are busy. The person on the phone does not know what the team are doing. All you have to do is excuse yourself, answer the ringing phone and take a message. This way the patient calling is aware that you ▶

have acknowledged them. When a message has been taken, the team member must inform the patient when their call will be returned – and they must keep their promise.

Another way you may be losing the new patient is by being in ‘tell mode’, rather than exercising your listening skills. It is important to be interested, rather than interesting. When you listen to the new patient by asking them open questions, it demonstrates that you care about the individual. You will also stand out from other practices that they may have called.

## A typical new patient phone call

This is how a typical new patient phone call occurs:

**Team manager (TM):** ‘Hello, dental practice’

**New patient (NP):** ‘Hello, I would like to know the cost of whitening’

**TM:** ‘Ok, there are two ways you can do this, one costs £300 and the other £500. If you want to know if you are suitable you need to come in and see Dr Smith and the cost is £30 + X-rays’.

What level of perceived value does this type of response provide? The answer is none whatsoever. This happens everyday in dental practices throughout the UK. Why would a patient want to part with money to see a dentist when the phone call isn’t professional, or not creating a great first impression because it is the same as the three previous practices that this patient has called?

## Initial consultation

The biggest way you are losing new patient’s is by not offering free of charge initial consultations. Every practice should be offering free initial consultations – this shows integrity. No new patient would want to part with their hard earned money then they don’t even know if they will like the practice or even be suitable for treatment – any treatment.

Two years ago I wanted hair extensions. I looked online – exactly the same as your new patients do. I wrote down the telephone numbers of the salons located close to me, and the ones that were an hour away. When I contacted the salons they all wanted to book me in for a consultation that would cost money. I did not book in. I did not want extensions that were unethical, or that could cause me to develop bald patches. I wanted to know all my options and make an informed decision before parting with my cash. The salon I chose offered me a free appointment to discuss my options. This situation applies to your new patients wanting to find out more about your clinic and your options.

Offering free of charge appointments does not have to cost you money. You can utilise a knowledgeable team member to undertake these appointments. They can have their own diary and their responsibility is to build relationships with the new patient, converting them into new patient examinations for the practice. Look for a friendly team member with dental knowledge and you are well on your way to being able to offer free appointments.

### Top tips

#### Implement a ‘two-ring’ policy

Ensure all calls are answered within two rings.

#### Keep your promises

If a message has been taken, inform the patient when their call will be returned and make sure they keep their promise.

#### Show interest

Use your listening skills and ask open questions.


## Moving forwards

Any loss of a new patient is not acceptable – whether it is due to an engaged or ringing telephone, a poorly handled greeting, a rushed team member answering the patient’s questions at the speed of light, a team member not having enough product knowledge, or not having an option (such as free appointments) to convert the new patient.

You need to address every aspect of your front desk performance and ensure systems are in place to help with the first impression and conversion of the telephone call.

From here I invite you to look at your systems for new patient enquiries, to work out with the front desk team how much the average new patient is worth to the practice. Then begin to offer, and advertise, free initial consultations where a team member has to listen to your patient. That way you will find out exactly what they want from you so you can meet their expectations. This is how each new patient enquiry will become a gain rather than a loss.

## Because you’re worth it!

Five lucky *Private Dentistry* readers have the opportunity to receive a mystery shopper telephone enquiry to their practice. This is courtesy of Laura Horton Consulting and is based on a first come, first served basis. Call Laura for further information on 07912 360 779. 

### Comments to [pd@fmc.co.uk](mailto:pd@fmc.co.uk)

Laura Horton works with dentists and their teams to increase sales and profits with proven successful methods. Laura has been successfully implementing the treatment co-ordinator role into dental practices throughout the UK, helping them to become customer focused businesses that outperform their competition. To find out more visit [www.laurahortonconsulting.co.uk](http://www.laurahortonconsulting.co.uk), email [laura@laurahortonconsulting.co.uk](mailto:laura@laurahortonconsulting.co.uk) or call 07912 360779.

Laura Horton will be speaking at this year’s World Aesthetic Congress (WAC) on 11-12 June at Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in London. To book please call 0800 371652 or visit [www.independentseminars.co.uk/wac](http://www.independentseminars.co.uk/wac).

