

# Telephone skills for pharmacist's assistants

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Some people love speaking on the phone, others hate it. Whichever category you fall into, you will discover that using the telephone at work is totally different from chatting to friends and family.

The service you give over the telephone is as important as the services you provide when speaking to a client face to face. The call can create a positive impression, or it can totally discourage people from coming to the pharmacy – you don't want to be responsible for chasing people away from your pharmacy! By following the advice below, you can create a positive image from the beginning of the call until the end.

## Answer as quickly as you can

Obviously, the longer a phone rings, the more irritated the person on the other side becomes. Equally obvious is the fact that you cannot always drop everything to answer the phone. The best thing to do is to answer it as soon as you can. If you are not working alone, this is a lot easier as the load is shared. Experts advise that business calls should be answered within the first three rings.

## Be prepared

Make sure before you answer the phone that you have a pen and paper handy. If you need to take a message, make sure that you do so accurately. Spell the client's name correctly (ask if you don't know!), write down a comprehensive account of what the client has said and make sure that the message reaches the correct person.

It's also useful for you to write things down as a reminder to use during the conversation. For example, if you have a problem remembering names, write down the caller's name as soon as it is given. Use the caller's name during the call – it shows that you are paying attention.

## Your attitude counts

Even if you're unhappy or irritated, try to project the image of a confident, enthusiastic and polite person. Make sure that

your voice and your words create this image. It can be done with practice! And it makes a difference to the way the caller perceives the conversation.

## Your opening words

Remember that this is a business call. Greetings should be sharp and to the point.

There are three parts to a greeting – welcoming words, the business or facility name, your name.

The welcoming words are a pleasant way to start the call – good morning, good afternoon, thank you for calling. The business/facility name tells the caller where his call went to. If you're working in a community pharmacy, use the name of the pharmacy. If the call comes through a switchboard, use the name of the department, e.g. pharmacy, dispensary, store room. It's important to tell the caller your name – you have a relationship with the caller for the duration of the call and it will make the caller feel more comfortable to know the identity of the voice on the other end of the phone.

## Use your voice to best advantage

It's a good idea to smile as you answer the phone. Smiling makes your voice sound friendlier – try it and listen to the difference in your voice!

Remember that the caller does not want to hear someone who is aggressive towards them or someone who sounds bored with the conversation. By changing your tone of voice, you can express interest in the caller's reason for calling.

Speak clearly, and not too fast. It is up to you to make sure that the conversation feels natural to the caller.

## Listening and responding

Listen without interrupting, but while you are listening you can formulate your response. Be sure to give feedback, even if it is merely to repeat what the caller has said, but ideally show

that you have heard and understood what the caller is saying. Acknowledge the callers concerns and requests.

### Control the call

While it is important to have a good relationship with the caller, remember that this is not a social call. If the caller strays away from the reason for the call, gently bring them back to the point. Show that you intend to handle their issue effectively and efficiently.

### Dealing with difficult calls

There will always be occasions when someone calls to complain about something – the wrong product supplied, the long waiting time, the service, the price, the list is endless.

In dealing with difficult calls, it's important to remain calm and professional. While the caller is explaining the problem, analyse what you personally can or cannot do about it. Be careful not to get defensive. Callers don't appreciate excuses – they want action. Be sincere at all times. If a mistake has been made, acknowledge that it should not have happened, apologise and do what you can do to resolve the problem. If you're unable to do anything, make every effort to transfer the caller to someone who can help. When in doubt, politely tell the customer that you believe that the pharmacist will be the person who is best able to help them, and transfer the call to the pharmacist.

### Concluding a call

Calls should be ended on a positive note. Use the opportunity to express appreciation. Ending with phrases like "Thanks for calling" or "I appreciate your bringing this to my attention" make a difference in the way the caller feels about the conversation.

### Further reading

1. Telephone skills training. Available from: <http://www.bsmcpss.com/resources/study-guides/OPH%2001%2001-101.pdf>
2. <https://www.channels.app/blog/telephone-skills#h1>
3. <https://telephonedoctor.com/10-essential-business-telephone-skills/>