

# The Secret Door to Your Agency

CARING Magazine · August 1998  
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The first impression your agency makes isn't necessarily the one presented by a nurse or therapist; it happens much sooner than you might think - with a telephone call.

The door that most people use when they first make contact with your agency is not a traditional door. It's your communication door - the door most people come through when they first call. And given its importance, the question that must be answered is, "What kind of reception do people get when they first enter the communication door of your agency?"

## Is It an Open Door?

Your receptionist, secretary, or any person who answers your phone (the communication door) is clearly the chief greeter of your agency. She or he is the person who begins to set the image of the agency in the callers' minds.

Who are your callers? They are the people who will shape the future of your agency. They are your patients, referral sources, managed care companies, physicians - everyone whose perceptions of you shape how they will relate to you. Their impression of your agency is very often established by how staff respond to them on that very first phone call.

Does it matter how warm, courteous and inviting the receptionist is? Consider this. The person who answers your phone sets the first image, shaping how others look at the agency. This person gives callers their first impression of the agency ... and we all know the saying about first impressions.

## Making the First Impression a Positive Impression

If first impressions are lasting impressions, what is the first impression of your agency? Do you know? Do you know how to find out? Do you know how to improve it once you do find out? Here are a few suggestions that might help:

Call your office yourself using the line your customers call. Listen to the greeting. Sometimes receptionists say a company's name so fast, you wonder if you've called the right number. Is this your greeting? Did the person sound cheerful? Did he or she sound happy to help or as though you were a nuisance?

Every so often ask one of your callers, "Did you have any trouble getting through?" If you know the caller well enough, ask him or her if the receptionist seemed friendly. Don't be afraid to ask a few questions. Not only do you find out if you have a problem, you let the customer know you care and that the call is important.

Make sure the person answering your phone knows your agency. Did you provide him or her with an information session - more than just reading a brochure? Does she know your mission statement? It may not seem important but if customer service is part of your mission statement, it should be posted in front of that person.

Be careful with a voice mail system. Although voice mail is a great idea and convenient, it can be a hindrance for your agency. Watch for system programming that may annoy your callers. Lengthy or complicated messages are not only bothersome, but difficult for elderly patients. After hearing the first message, how long is the caller on hold until he or she reaches a mailbox? Does the system send the caller in circles or force them to redial the agency? Test your voice mail system to ensure it's user friendly.

Teach your staff (not just your receptionist) positive phone skills. Anyone who wants to can project a positive image over the phone. Teach your staff to be positive, to recognize how their voice and inflections come across and to use their natural skills of warmth and caring. And as hokey as it sounds, smiling makes someone sound better on the phone.

Phone reception is the door to your agency, so make it an inviting one. Let every caller know that your agency approaches every inquiry in a caring and positive manner. It's a great first impression.

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