

Cutting off communication

Are your receptionists doubling as sales prevention officers? By Ashley Latter

When I lecture, I often state that the receptionist is probably the most important person in your practice. Think of it this way – your receptionist is in control of whether clients even come into practice when they deal with new enquiries, hence they play a large part in whether your practice is successful.

Here is a true story to back up this idea and although it is related to a hotel, there is plenty to learn from the experience.

My parents were having a party on a Sunday afternoon a few weeks ago. My brother rang me and suggested that it would be a good idea if the two families stayed in a hotel the night before to have a family get-together. I thought it was a great idea and said I would contact the hotel that we have both stayed in on several occasions.

Here follows how the conversation went, pretty much word for word:

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AL: Hello. Can I please book two family rooms for a week on Saturday? Do you have availability? [By the way, I am holding my credit card in my hand.]

SPO [sales prevention officer, also know as the receptionist!]: Yes we have availability, but I cannot offer you those rooms, unless you stay Friday night as well.

AL: I am sorry, my brother works on a Saturday and we can only stay on the Saturday. Can you please accommodate us?

SPO: No, I am sorry, it is the policy of the hotel.

AL: We really like your hotel. Do you have any family rooms available?

SPO: Yes, they are all available.

AL: How much is it to stay then?

SPO: €165 a night, bed and breakfast.

AL: So for two nights it would be that times two.

SPO: Yes.

AL: Right, so it looks like you cannot help me here.

SPO: I am afraid not, sorry.

AL: Bye, then.

SPO: Good night.

Firstly, let me please acknowledge one thing – I respect their business model. If they fill their rooms just for one night then it is obviously going to affect their profits, as they would then have to turn away weekend bookings. I understand, I am in business myself. However, there were

several things that this receptionist could have done:

1. Asked me for my name and thanked me for enquiring about their services. Maybe she could even have asked me how I had heard about the hotel
2. If she had done this and checked her computer, she would have established that we had stayed there before several times. We were existing, happy customers
3. She could have been flexible and, on this occasion, offered us the rooms. She did say that they were all available. This was winter in Blackpool – probably a quiet time for the hotel industry and it was less than 10 days before we wanted to visit the hotel
4. At the very least, she could have taken my contact details and offered to ring me back in a few days time, if they had not sold any weekend packages, and offer me the rooms then.

I would have been delighted if they would have offered us option number four, as my family likes the hotel and likes the brand.

Instead, the result was no sale and a lost opportunity. The hotel probably lost a sale of around €600 – after all, we would have had dinner there, a few bottles of wine, etc. They have probably lost future sales from us as well.

After that experience, the importance of the receptionist's role really hit home. He or she can make or break your practice



and a good receptionist is worth their weight in gold. A bad one has the potential to ruin your practice, as the earlier quoted receptionist is probably doing for the hotel. If you have watched *Little Britain*, you will be familiar with the scene in the travel shop where the agent says to her customers: 'The computer says no'. It really does happen out there.

I know a lot of practices that have spent thousands of euros on advertising, search engine optimisation for their website and other marketing strategies. The enquiries that they generate are potentially worth a small fortune and should be treated like gold dust. It is absolutely imperative that your receptionist's end goal is to ensure that enquirers make an appointment with your practice and no one else.

In my next article, I will share a few strategies that the receptionist can adopt when dealing with new enquires on the telephone. 