



Four Easy Steps to Drastically Improve Your Phone-Based Customer Service

It's time to dump voicemail and make other needed changes.

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The Japanese concept of kaizen (constant improvement) is a fundamental reason for Japan's legendary customer service, and for the enduring success of conglomerates like Toyota, Honda, and Sony. Many in the know credit the work of an American engineer in the 1950s as the catalyst for this movement. W. Edwards Deming, an expert in the field of statistical process control, was sent to Tokyo by the U.S. government at the end of World War II to help Japanese industry recover. His philosophies helped drive an unprecedented economic miracle, as the country rose from ashes to become the world's second largest economy, all in under a decade.

If his ideas could transform a nation, they just may improve your patient satisfaction rates.

In a nutshell, Deming believed that true customer success was an iterative process: find out what your customers want, build it; then test

how happy it makes them, over and over again. Customer satisfaction cannot be a one-time goal; rather, it's a state of mind in successful organizations. This mindset never goes out of fashion—American Express, Zappos, and Southwest Airlines continue to build brand advocates on a daily basis, by doing just that.

You can, too, in just four easy

idea what goes on with the average front desk phone call. That's a shame, as that first exposure sets a patient's expectation of what your service will be like—and whether or not they'll choose you at all. No matter how much time and money you spend on marketing, there's a moment of truth when a member of your staff will pick up that first call and either make or

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steps. Follow these words of wisdom from Deming,^{1,2} and turn your current phone dilemmas into future success.

Problem: Your front desk staff is inconsistent (at best) or rude (at worst) on the phone with patients.

Solution: Record your phone calls.
"You can expect what you inspect." —W. Edwards Deming

Deming emphasized measuring and testing to predict results, but very few healthcare practices have any

break your future, quite literally.

The best companies in the world do not leave this to chance. When you call Apple, Mercedes-Benz, or Amazon, and hear "This call may be recorded," it's for this specific reason: so the companies can inspect the service levels of their agents. Knowing what types of questions customers ask allows the companies to adjust their offerings. Hearing what their representatives say lets them give praise where appropriate,

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or correct gently when needed.

Additionally, knowing a call is being recorded tends to bring out the best behavior of phone attendants. If you're serious about success, this isn't an option, it's a necessity.

Improvements in technology have made call recording very affordable; it's no longer something only big businesses can afford. For a small monthly fee, you can use cloud-based services that will track and record your phone calls with zero change to the way phones are configured in your offices.

Problem: You have no idea what your patients are experiencing when they call your practice.

Solution: Reveal the patient experience with mystery shoppers.

"There is no substitute for knowledge."—W. Edwards Deming

Thomas Edison said, "There is no substitute for hard work," but Deming believed that if your process was smarter, perhaps you wouldn't have to work so hard. He believed you need to know more, always, about everything in your system. If you suspect your customer service standard is leaky, what better way to find out than to become a customer yourself?

For most of us, turning our practices into "Undercover Boss" isn't feasible (your staff would see right through that wig and glasses, anyway).

Instead, turn to mystery shoppers to give you inside intelligence on what it feels like to be your own patient. A mystery shopper is someone who calls your practice and pretends to be a potential patient (when they're really evaluating the performance of your staff). After the call, a report is filed on categories such as friendliness, knowledge of what you do, and professionalism. With your reports, you can then sit down with your staff members to go over the findings so that the group can improve collectively.

You can outsource this task to independent firms, or do some call testing yourself if you have a call recording solution in place. The great benefit of having an unbiased third party perform your mystery shop-

per calls is that it leaves no room for dispute, because the assessment comes from people outside of your organization. However, there's a cost associated with using a firm, so you may opt to just perform them yourself with your call recording application. Either way is fine, as long as you gain proper assessments of what your patients are experiencing when they call your practice. Walk a mile in your patients' shoes; you may be shocked by what you find.

He believed that an engaged workforce helped sense faults faster, and led to more lasting change—which was his ultimate goal. He was after product quality, not quality inspection, and believed that once you built quality into the product, you would eliminate the need for massive inspection while constantly decreasing cost. It's the Holy Grail of business operations—but achieving it requires workers who enjoy what they do, so they feel a sense of ownership over results.

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Problem: You are having a hard time gaining buy-in on improvements from your staff.

Solution: Reward great performers for a job well done.

"Joy in work"—W. Edwards Deming

Pride in work, joy in work—hopefully we've all felt it at some point in our careers. When you feel happy and appreciated, don't you tend to do a better job? Deming saw this to be a fact across his years studying business, and firmly believed in developing programs that enabled this type of happiness. As someone whose philosophy was responsible for some of the greatest corporate wealth ever created, you'd assume he was all about the bottom line and profit at any cost, right? You'd be mistaken.

He believed an emphasis on short-term profits was a deadly disease, as was evaluation by performance, merit rating, or annual review. He believed in driving out fear from an organization, so that everyone could work more effectively for the company. He believed that placing blame on a workforce was backward, as the worker is generally only responsible for 15% of the mistakes: the faulty system designed by management is responsible for 85% of unintended consequences. In short, he believed in a happy workplace.¹

Once you have call recording and mystery shopping built in to your process, you'll have regular information that will allow you to adjust your process for your patients and your staff. As you seek to constantly improve your practice for the marketplace, also seek to constantly improve working conditions within your organization. Treat your team with dignity and respect, and they'll return that favor tenfold.

Additionally, emphasize peak performances with rewards. Remember, though, that these rewards don't always have to be monetary. Different personalities respond to different forms of acknowledgment, and you should strive to know your staff well enough to understand who prefers what. A flat-screen TV or iPad might be nice for Sally, but Joe may just want a day off to spend with his boys. Involve your team when you conceive a reward scheme; you'll be amazed at the results when everyone's interests are aligned.

Problem: You're missing out on patients, and you don't even know it!

Solution: Answer all your calls live, and never send people to voicemail.

"The sure way to increase productivity is to better administrate man and machine."—W. Edwards Deming

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Machines are critical to the success of any healthcare practice—that much is for sure. However, as Deming pointed out, “If you don’t understand how to run an efficient operation, new machinery will just give you new problems of operation and maintenance.” While the voicemail box certainly isn’t the machine you spent the most money on, chances are it’s the one costing you the most money!

Why? The problem with voicemail is that it provides a false sense of security to you and your staff. When you leave the office, you are making the assumption that all of your patients (new and existing) will take the time to leave you messages so that you can return their calls at your earliest convenience. In reality, they’re not. According to Forbes, 80% of callers hang up when they hear a voicemail message.³ That translates to your practice capturing only one out of five revenue-producing opportunities during lunch break, after hours, and on weekends.

No thriving practice can afford to lose that many opportunities.

Today’s smartphone generation has everything they need at their fingertips, and they expect your response times to be on par with everyone else they do business with. If not, they’re immediately scouring Google looking at other providers and pressing blue buttons to reach

someone live. That means your voicemail box just helped your competitor gain a new patient!

So what’s the answer? Plain and simple: you need an answering service. Yes, yes, yes... we know that your run-of-the-mill answering service hires agents who are cold and robotic, and don’t care about the calls they are taking on your behalf. We also know that the traditional answering service can just take messages, which isn’t much better than what your voicemail box can achieve.

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But that’s not everyone! There are good services out there that are bucking the trend and attempting to change the inadequacies that have plagued answering services since the 1970s. Agents can book appointments, capture leads, and provide that warm and friendly voice your patients are looking for. Do your homework and chances are you will find a service that meets your needs.

Coca-Cola, #4 on the *Forbes List of The World’s Most Valuable Brands*, recently announced it is eliminating voicemail at its corporate headquarters.⁴ If Coca-Cola can get rid of voicemail, so can you! The net result will be a far greater phone experience for your patients and peace of mind for you and your team in knowing that you’re not missing out on opportunities when you leave the office. **PM**

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