

medical economics®

We found something much better than an answering service

Fed up with delayed and garbled messages, this practice adopted a more reliable and less expensive way to stay in touch with patients.

By Gilbert L. Solomon, M.D.

FAMILY PHYSICIAN/CANOGA PARK, CALIF.

**Dr. Solomon
published
this article
about
The
Telephone
Connection's
Doctors'
Service
with Live
Operator
Backup**

Those of you who have slammed the receiver down after encountering a computerized "voice," hear me out. I, too, would rather have a human answer my calls. But consider the following near-catastrophes, and I think you'll agree that voice mail—a computer driven answering system—could be a lifesaver for you and your patients.

► When an annoyed answering service operator finally put my patient through to me after her third call in two hours, I was horrified. Chris was in tears; she had a ruptured ectopic pregnancy. The delay could have killed her.

► On another occasion, I was just leaving the emergency room after seeing a patient when my beeper sounded. I phoned the answering service, and the operator informed me that I'd had a call from the ER about a patient who'd just arrived. As it turned out, the call had come in an hour earlier. It was about the same patient I'd just treated.

If our answering service could wait an hour or two to call me about an emergency, my partner and I figured that voice mail could do at least as well. We dumped our service, and we've never regretted it.

Voice mail gives patients choices

Our new system didn't replace our

receptionists. They're still the first to pick up the phones. But when they're busy or the office is closed, voice mail serves as a backup.

We acquired that backup without purchasing any equipment (all we need are regular Touch-Tone phones). Instead, we contracted with a local voice mail supplier. This way, we can take advantage of its technological upgrades instead of committing ourselves to a system that might quickly become obsolete.

The supplier has its own backups. Its computers store copies of our outgoing messages, so we don't have to record new ones if one of the voice mail operators accidentally erases a tape. The computers also store patients' messages, which is more secure than storing them on a tape in our office. (These messages are retained for 72 hours, so if any are legally sensitive, I can have them transferred to a cassette tape for long-term storage.)

Patients who reach our voice mail can press numbers on their telephone keypads to leave messages for our nurses, the office manager, my partner, or me. My partner and I are no longer bothered with billing queries. And, in an emergency at night or on weekends, patients can always reach us with our voice mail's efficient paging system.

For those who don't have a Touch-Tone

**For More Information Call
The Telephone Connection (800) 218-2882**

phone, the message then gives our direct-dial numbers for emergencies and routine medical problems. These calls go to an operator at the voice mail company.

My partner and I can instruct the system to ring our pager at any intervals we specify. For emergency calls, the system pages us every 10 minutes. If we don't respond within half an hour, the computer pages an operator at the voice mail company. This person has phone numbers where my partner or I can be reached.

For routine messages, the system pages us only between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. If we don't respond to the first page, we get another in half an hour. With the paging feature, we don't have to check our voice "mailboxes" for messages, and our patients are impressed when we call them promptly.

"Overall, our patients do a better job than the service operators did of discriminating between an emergency and a routine problem."

Surprise: Patients like voice mail

We worried about our patients' reactions when we introduced the system. But the only ones who complained were those who don't like any change. Compliments exceeded complaints by a wide margin.

Patients rarely abuse the system. Some occasionally wake us in the middle of the night for a non-emergency, but so did the answering service. Overall, our patients do a better job than the service operators did of discriminating between an emergency and a routine problem. True, they sometimes forget to leave their phone numbers, or we can't understand their messages, but no more than before voice mail.

The answering service used to relay cryptic descriptions of patients' problems. With voice mail, patients can leave more detailed messages, so we can better judge how quickly to call back. What's more, we don't have to worry about answering service operators interrupting our conversations to hear whether we're off the phone.

Another plus is that we can accept more incoming calls. In the past, as many as 80 callers per hour were reaching busy signals, especially in the early morning. We could have added more phone lines, but that would have been expensive. And, since we had only four employees to answer the phones, it wouldn't have solved the problem. Nor could the answering service, which could accept only a handful of simultaneous calls. The voice mail company, though, can accommodate 40 phone lines.

And our patients have more privacy than they would with a service or an answering machine. With individual voice mailboxes for each of us, patients don't need to worry about broadcasting details of their conditions to anyone other than their doctor. What's more, each voice mailbox has a passcode, so it's virtually impossible for our office manager, say, to get a message directed to me. To ensure confidentiality, I can change my box's passcode regularly.

Unlike traditional answering services and machines, moreover, our voice mail company isn't susceptible to a total breakdown: it operates several computers, so the system can continue functioning if one computer fails. The company also has a gasoline generator to power the computers in the event of an electrical outage. And should my pager conk out, an operator at the voice mail company will call me to let me know.

Topping things off, the cost of our new system is reasonable. Our monthly bill, including unlimited calls and rent for our pager, is \$105-half what we paid our answering service. A \$20 installation charge covered programming the computers and phones, as well as training.

All in all, it's a bargain—especially when you consider the tasks that voice mail can't do: It can't be rude to your patients. It can't keep you waiting while it checks your messages. It can't copy the patient's phone number incorrectly, or misplace the instructions on how to reach you. What it can do is get in touch with you when your patients need you. ■

Reprinted from MEDICAL ECONOMICS

Copyright© 1993 and published by Medical Economics Publishing Inc., at Montvale, N.J. 07645-1742