

Customer Service for Acupuncturists

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I am a one-clown circus. Like most acupuncturists, I don't have a receptionist; I am the receptionist. I am also the secretary, office manager, accountant, janitor, marketing department, computer expert, etc., in addition to my real job(s) - acupuncturist, herbalist, psychologist, counselor, fitness consultant, dietician and witch doctor. (Yes, some people really do need a witch doctor.)

My business class at school talked mostly about how to spend and make money, but not the day-to-day details of actually operating your business in a professional way. Lucky for me, I had several office jobs in my past life and some great training. I use these skills as often as I use my professional training. Over the years, as I have enjoyed various massage, acupuncture and other health care appointments myself, I often have found practitioners who clearly have not learned that these skills are at least as important as which points you use.

Use the Phone Correctly

I used to be a 911 dispatcher in Alaska. My supervisor was office gold. She trained me well to provide professional, efficient and effective service. Her number-one rule - never answer the phone unless you have a pen in your hand. As soon as you pick up the phone, *pay attention* and *write everything down*.

I keep a notebook and pen by the phone. Have people spell everything: names, streets, towns, diseases, drugs; whatever you don't know. If you can't answer the phone with intent at that minute, let the machine pick it up. You also might want to muster a little enthusiasm when you answer the phone, and especially when you record voicemail greetings.

I don't care how you feel that day. Fake it for the 10 seconds you are recording your phone greeting. Your callers can't enjoy your jazzy outfit, cheery face and ethereal countenance when they call; they will form their entire opinion of you and your business in those 10 seconds.

Speaking of phone greetings, put some effort into coming up with a greeting that conveys the image you want people to have. I change my greeting daily and always use today's date. For example, "This is Julie. It's Monday, February 10th and I'll be here today until 11 p.m." That greeting lets people know you are in the office and they can expect you will call them back that same day - right?

Return calls, return calls, return calls, as soon as you can. This seems to be the most frequent violation of common business sense I see. Not returning a call says, "I don't care about you or your problem, and I don't need your hard-earned money. And your friend who recommended me? Can't take her word for anything, can you?" At the end of your day, recheck your messages, read over your phone notes and make sure you took care of everyone who called.

Careful Expectations

In the winter, I keep a tea service in my waiting room. I have one senior lady who really loves her tea. When the weather warmed up, I took it out for the season. When she came in for her next appointment, she was miffed there wasn't any tea.

The lessons learned:

- You can't please everyone all of the time.
- Be careful of the expectations you give your patients.

People really are creatures of habit, which is a two-edged sword. They are most comfortable when they know what to expect and will put tremendous energy into building those expectations based on what *you* do in your office. This is tricky because if you don't watch it, the inmates will soon be running the asylum. Everything you do - from what you wear to how many needles you use - contributes to these expectations, erroneous or not.

Another patient of mine (originally a cynical, militant skeptic and now an enthusiastic acupuncture convert) had such spectacular results from her first treatment that she wants me to repeat it every time. Not happening. After her first treatment, I applied ear pellets for her to wear home. Ear pellets have now taken on a magical power for her and whenever I forget to finish her treatment with pellets, I find her sitting on the edge of the table pointing to her ears. OK, it's a small thing and the effort-to-results ratio is worth it. I can do that.

So, you are the "patient-whisperer," whether you want to be or not. If you are thoughtful enough about what you are doing, you can train your patients to your (and their) advantage. I train my patients to schedule and pay for themselves unassisted. My system centers around the "patient envelope" that features their personal number they use to reserve their appointments. If, God forbid, that envelope is not out there exactly when and where it's supposed to be, I hear all about it

Advertise Your Hours

There should be a sign on your door and a way for people to call and know when you will be there. If you say you will be in the office, be there. Get an answering machine with voicemail boxes on it so you can record that in a greeting and callers can choose to listen to it.

Don't have regular hours? The sign on my door says, "Appointments are available Monday through Thursday. That does not mean I will be here all those hours. I do not keep regular hours. If I don't have an appointment scheduled, I may be here working, on a mountaintop communicating with the mother ship, or frolicking through the tulips and eating organic bon-bons. I know - how can you run a business like that? Well, life is too short to sit around scrubbing floors and waiting for sick people to show up. So, if you plan to drop by and will be really tweaked if I'm not here, call first. I'd love to see you."

Give Patients a Take Home

Why do you think the bank hands out toasters and suckers? It's bribery; it's Pavlovian conditioning. Some part of our brain wants to believe the bank "cares" about us, and odds are when you stuff your bread in the toaster, you will occasionally think of them.

You, on the other hand, who really do care about your customers, have a great chance to improve their treatments and keep yourself in their thoughts a little more often by putting pellets in their ears or using intradermals, patches, stick-on moxa or magnets. I find patients really love these little extra-care goodies and will often request them after the first one. They also are good show-and-tell props to take home.

Keep It Clean

Keep your office spotless. Would you want to get half-naked in an office that looks like a beat-up gas station bathroom? Me neither. Here are some quick and easy rules I like to follow:

I'm a fan of the carpet sweeper. It's cheap, fast, silent and surprisingly effective. Clean your doorknobs often. It will keep you and your patients healthier. I try to take a quick scan of the room between patients and sweep/wipe anything I would not want to lie or walk on myself. I keep my office door closed and make whatever kind of mess I want to in there, but I keep the rest of the office as clean as possible.

Wise healers throughout history have understood that medicine is theater. Maybe you don't paint your face and whip out a dead chicken, but your costume, image and atmosphere are still three of your most powerful healing tools. Consider them carefully and craft them with intent.

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