



MARKETING / OFFICE / STAFF

## Streamline Your Front Desk

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Your front office can be your greatest source of efficiency or it can be a constant bottleneck. Increasing the productivity of this area, while not sacrificing the quality of patient interaction, can be a little tricky. However, with some focused effort and intention, your front desk can keep your practice running smoothly.

Before we examine specific tips to streamline your front desk, let's review some general information. First, it should go without saying that you must hire high-quality staff and give them the tools they need to do their jobs well. In other words, provide superior and constant training as well as top-quality, functional equipment. Then, recognize the efforts of your staff and compensate them fairly to keep them happy and motivated.

Next, at least once or twice a year, perform a "Spring Cleaning" of your front desk area. De-clutter and throw out anything that isn't essential to front desk operations. Make sure everything is in its place, and that items are found in close proximity to where they're used. With these basics addressed, let's look at four specific tips to save you and your patients time.



### Team Huddles

A team huddle is a 5 to 10 minute pre-shift meeting that helps get everyone on the same page at the start of the day or shift. It provides a time for the entire team to review and discuss the upcoming schedule and patient flow, as well as answer any immediate questions. Consistent huddles help prevent misunderstandings or miscommunications that can occur when the day gets hectic. For extra impact on your practice, use the pre-shift huddles as a way to build up your team by incorporating affirmations, gratitude, or the mission of your practice into each one.

### Pre-Schedule Appointments

Think of the last time you went to the dentist. They may have asked you to schedule your next two cleanings while you were there. Pre-scheduling is a simple way to improve efficiency and save time. If your practice sees patients for "regular" visits - whether three times a week or four times a year - ask your patients to secure the days and times that best fit their schedules by booking several appointments in advance. The appointments can always be changed later if something comes up, and of course additional visits can be added for acute issues when needed. Pre-scheduling can also help you to ensure adequate staffing for those extra busy days.

### Bi-Annual Process Audits

At least twice a year, scrutinize your front office processes and procedures to see what can be updated, improved, revised, delegated, or otherwise perfected. Pretend you're a new patient or employee interacting with these processes and procedures for the first time. Are they clunky and cumbersome, or easy and efficient? (If you have a hard time with this, hire a consultant to look at your processes and procedures with a fresh eye.) When trying to find ways to improve your processes and procedures, pay attention to information found in trade journals, seminars, professional organizations, and your peers. Finally, don't be afraid to try a new process or procedure. That's the only way you'll know for certain if it'll increase efficiency. Evaluate the tips

and suggestions to identify what might be a good fit for your practice. Don't change something just to say you've changed it. Apply change judiciously and after careful consideration. If it becomes clear the new way isn't better, you can always go back to the old way.

## Use Technology

In today's culture, technology is all-pervasive and constantly changing. Yes, it can be frustrating when something doesn't work right, but don't let that hold you back from using technology to simplify your front office. As they say, "Work smarter, not harder." Some ideas to get you started:

- Automate e-mail or text appointment reminders to patients. Not only does this save your front office from having to make dozens of reminder calls, but your patients may prefer these methods of communication.
- Use unobtrusive headsets to communicate between staff members. This can save time and improve efficiency because employees won't have to run from the front to the back every time they have a question or need to relay information.
- E-mail or digitize intake paperwork. Intake paperwork can be completed via computer (fillable PDFs) from the comfort of a patient's home or it can be done in the office using pre-loaded tablets. When the patient submits their paperwork it goes right into your EHR system.
- Set up automatic payments for those on a regular schedule. This saves your staff from having to process payments at each visit and it simplifies life for your patients. They don't have to wait in line to check-out and they know exactly what to budget for.
- Maximize the use of your EHR software. Does it have a patient portal for patients to log-in and review their information? Can patients send secure messages to the office using their log-in? Can you import digital x-rays, lab reports, faxes, and other information into the system? The less paperwork your staff must physically handle, the more time they'll have available to take care of your patients. There may be a learning curve initially, but it'll be worth the time and effort.
- Use social media to fill a newly-opened time slot. Instead of leaving that appointment empty, or spending time to call individual patients, a quick post to social media can have the slot re-booked in no time.

Team huddles and pre-scheduling are efficiency-boosters you can easily incorporate into your practice. Process audits and technology use require a bit more time and research, but can help take your practice to the next level. Which of these four tips appeals to you? Don't wait - begin the implementation process today.

## Bonus Tip

As you work on streamlining your front desk, make sure to include your team in the process. Not only can staff involvement decrease their potential resistance to change, but more importantly, your employees may have valuable suggestions to improve efficiency. Who better to ask than the people who perform the job every day?

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