Rise above the crowd
Boost your self esteem and the practice image by positively engaging with callers, says Glenys Bridges

Whether it's in person or over the telephone, the receptionist is usually the first person patients and suppliers encounter when they contact a dental practice. And it's likely that their opinion of a practice is based on their impression of the receptionist.

As well as working on the front desk and greeting patients, telephone skills are an important aspect of working on a reception. When you work on the phone all day in a customer-service role, the telephone is a work tool for which you need to develop a high level of skill. Learning and honing telephone and listening skills should feature in each receptionist's on-going professional development plan (PDP).

Great telephone skills do many things to maintain an excellent relationship with patients, which in turn benefit every person involved in the practice. Some people will have a knack for these skills, and will find it easy to learn them. Others may have to work a little harder. However, even if you are one of the lucky ones with a knack for these skills, it is a good idea to reflect from time to time on what good telephone skills actually are.

Why are skills important?
Let's say a patient calls to query an RCT estimate, because she doesn't understand why there are so many visits and X-rays. If the receptionist adopts a 'take it, or leave it' attitude, rather than outlining what's involved in the treatment, a breakdown in communication happens, which could lead to dissatisfaction, or even a complaint.

However, if the receptionist were to acknowledge the customer's concerns, look into the query and explain why the charges are valid, they will settle the matter. However, to do this, receptionists need a good understanding of treatment procedures, so care co-ordination training would be ideal for this type of query.

Some of the most important aspects of great customer service are in the telephone skills. Even if a receptionist has a great service attitude, without these basic skills, he or she doesn't stand a chance of being more than mediocre. However, if you implement the following skills in your daily reception work, you will rise above the crowd:

• **Smiling:** Smiles and gestures can easily be heard over the phone, so keeping that smile on your face helps to create a positive engagement with a caller every time you talk to them.

• **Empathy:** If you can't put yourself in a caller's shoes especially when you know they are wrong, how can you understand why they have the feelings they do about the issues they have called in about?

• **Problem-solving skills:** No question about it, you will get problem calls that require some solving. Ask the practice manager or owner for information and guidance, tools to solve any problem a customer may have, then it is your job to learn how to use them effectively.

Achieving excellence goes beyond simply knowing what these skills are and what they can do to help build trusting relationships between the dental team and patients. Practice makes perfect is what many people say, and this saying fits perfectly into this equation. When telephone queries are handled well, you should reflect on why things went so well, identify good practice and share it with colleagues.

For more information on receptionist skills, visit www.dental-resource.com.