

Finding the Right After-Hours Answering Service Makes all the Difference

by Luann Umbro

Perhaps the problems start small your answering service provided the wrong number for a patient. Then, it escalates—the service pages the wrong provider-on-call. You put up with these fumbles, hoping they will get the hang of things and it will be smooth sailing after a while.

For your providers, when their patients have a bad experience, you are the one who hears about it and that affects you directly. They want to know that their patients are handled courteously and efficiently. They also want assurance that they will only be paged when they are on call so their family time is not interrupted.



Unfortunately, it gets worse. On your first day back at work after a holiday weekend, you are greeted with a flood of provider and patient complaints. Inaccurate messages were dispatched. Urgent patient messages didn't get to the right person. The answering service still can't seem to page the right provider-on-call. You dread the next holiday weekend because you don't know if these problems will ever go away. It's time to do something about it.

The truth is, your answering service can have a huge impact on your work environment, especially in the realms of patient and provider satisfaction. To your patients, the quality and professionalism the service provides reflect the level of care your providers deliver. Patients often regard the answering service as an extension of your practice and do not differentiate between the two.

Just as answering service companies range from local mom-and-pop operations to companies working with more than 20,000 providers nationally, practices also vary in their needs. A cardiology or pediatrics practice places a high premium on responsiveness and accuracy of messages for their after-hours messages. Other specialties' after-hours calls may not be quite as urgent, but they should still be handled professionally and with superior customer service.

When choosing the right vendor for your answering service, consider what challenges your practice faces and find a vendor who can offer solutions customized to your practice. Some questions to consider when selecting an after-hours partner include:

Technology and Scope

- *How extensive in scope are your after-hours calls? Do you need a service that*

can handle urgent and non-urgent requests?

- *Do you often have last-minute changes to the on-call schedule? How does the vendor adapt to these last minute changes?*
- *Can all protocols, greetings, message templates, and on-call information be customized to fit your office's needs? Depending on your practice's specialty, this can be very important.*
- *Can the service tailor on-call preferences by an individual physician within a practice?*
- *Can pages be delivered via any sort of technology, e.g. smart phones, alphanumeric devices, iPhones, etc.?*
- *How quickly can the vendor be ready to assume after-hours coverage for your practice?*

Language Matters

- *Will your calls be answered with a live voice or is automation a component of the service?*
- *Do operators have a neutral accent? Are your patients and physicians able to understand them clearly?*
- *Does the vendor have translation or foreign language capabilities? Depending on the demographics of your patient population, this could be vital to patient communication in the after-hours arena.*

Reporting Capabilities

- *Can the service offer a web-based messaging system for your practice to track pages?*
- *Can they customize reports?*
- *Can they offer a backup system in the event of an emergency?*
- *Can they import messages into your practice management system or EMR?*

Finally, it is crucial to consider whether
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the vendor is HIPAA-compliant with its company-wide practices. This is especially important with the tightened HIPAA regulations that came out of the recent HITECH Act. The vendor will often deal with sensitive patient information which, if not handled in a HIPAA-compliant manner, could expose your practice to a large amount of risk. A vendor who is medical-only might be more advanced in the controls instituted to ensure compliance with all HIPAA regulations.

When you find a service that can

handle your after-hours environment with a high level of responsiveness and quality, your patient and provider satisfaction levels will increase.

However, make sure you check in periodically by conducting internal and external surveys to evaluate the patient and provider experience. You want to

ensure you get what you are paying for and that you are proactive about uncovering any potential problems.

With a trustworthy answering service as your partner, your patients and providers will be happier, and you can enjoy your holiday weekend. ■



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