

By Cynthia Matossian, MD



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# We spell success F-r-o-n-t D-e-s-k

Finding and training these vital employees is top of mind.

**T**he biggest challenges to any growing ophthalmology practice are finding the right front desk candidates and properly training them, as the practice's success hinges on the strength of this vital unit.

From the way phone calls are answered, to converting that caller into a patient via an appointment, to collecting the right fees at checkout and making the return appointment, a strong front desk team emerges from a strong training program. Yet despite their critical role, few people with adequate training apply for open positions.

On top of their numerous, diverse responsibilities, receptionists must stay pleasant and calm as they interact with patients. They require honed people skills – a critical component for the smooth operation of our three-office practice.

To succeed in our practice, a front desk employee must: answer phones in a pleasant, clear manner; greet patients as they enter the office; manage money collected from patients; sell recommended products to them at checkout; collect appropriate deductibles; validate referrals for insurance plans; and calm frustrated elderly when they learn Medicare does not cover refractions. To master these skills, we train new staff for three months before letting them work on their own.

## TRAINING

Most often, we hire front desk staff who've worked in other service industries such as restaurants and hospitality. We consider ourselves fortunate if a candidate has medical experience but that is rare.

We start from scratch. We look for people who are energetic, extroverted and gregarious. Those who are shy, timid, with small voices who cannot enunciate clearly or look you in the eye are people we avoid.

## THE REAL WORK BEGINS

After we do the normal first-day orientation procedures, the real work starts.

They are assigned to the head front-desk person to shadow

and take notes for at least a week. They are not given a specific task; instead they observe. They get training on the different types of appointments, insurances, co-payments, types of services and procedures each physician provides.

Once the new employees begin to exhibit comfort with what they have learned, their first task is to confirm upcoming appointments. Then they progress to checking patients in, and finally to checkout where they collect copays and deductibles and make appointments.

We also have our front desk staff shadow the physicians to see medical procedures and eye exams first hand in order to be better versed at explaining these steps to callers.

## CONSTANT TRAINING

Along with this training, the new employees attend weekly one-hour training sessions with the ophthalmic assistants. Topics include customer service and ophthalmic terminology.

After one year, they take a standardized test to become certified patient service specialists - which they must pass to stay in our practice. A well trained front desk staff with a positive attitude helps the practice grow and flourish. OM

