



DATA STUDY

THE 5 KEY PHONE TRENDS OF 2021

& HOW TO UNLOCK YOUR PRACTICE'S POTENTIAL IN 2022



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Phone trends to take advantage of in 2022



IN 2021,

Healthcare practices were forced to cope with a new normal as it related to patient care. In doing so, the phone was relied on more heavily than ever to communicate with patients, manage ongoing safety protocols, schedule and reschedule appointments, and ensure operations continued to run effectively. With that said, however, most practices dealt with staffing shortages, supply chain issues, transitions to virtual care, and other obstacles that made everyday operations more challenging.

With any number of priorities competing for staff's attention, the phone often became viewed as a nuisance to be dealt with, rather than a prime opportunity waiting to be capitalized on. This mindset caused healthcare practices to lose out on new patients and mismanage caller experience in many instances. While progress has been made in some areas of phone handling performance, ground has been lost in others.

To better understand the phone trends providers experienced in 2021, Call Box examined more than 1,800 healthcare practices across North America. The following study presents the top five phone trends of 2021 and potential missed opportunities your practice may have encountered over the phone this past year. Furthermore, the study offers strategic recommendations to improve your call outcomes in 2022 to achieve greater accountability, improve patient experience, and boost your bottom line.

THE 5 KEY PHONE TRENDS OF 2021

01 INCREASE IN INBOUND CALL VOLUME

In 2021, call volume increased by an average of 45.6% per practice location compared to 2020. More specifically, the average annual call volume per location was 3,461 in 2020. That number grew to 5,040 calls on average in 2021. That's a tremendous increase in call volume felt heavily by practice staff.

COVID-19 certainly played a role in this increase. Many practices closed for specific portions of 2020 or operated at a limited capacity, causing call volume to come to a crashing halt. However, call volume in 2020 still managed to come in higher than 2019. Once practices reopened in 2020, they were inundated with calls for rescheduling appointments, handling virtual or parking lot waiting room policies, and managing safety procedures. In 2021, this wave of patients only expanded as they accepted a new normal of patient care, returned to close quarter settings, and grew accustomed to the concept of scheduling appointments or making reservations almost anywhere they went.

While the call volume spike in 2021 was due, in part, to patient engagement and increased inquiries, **spam calls also wreaked havoc for many healthcare practices.** In 2020, 5.4% of the total call volume reaching a practice was

determined to be spam. In 2021, that number grew to 14.2%. It goes without saying that spam is on the rise. It's not only felt by individuals receiving extended warranty calls, but also businesses. One recommendation to reduce the number of spam calls reaching your staff is to implement a phone tree (also called a phone menu or bridge). This friendly greeting asks callers to select their reason for calling, such as "Press 1 for new patients. Press 2 for existing patients. Press 3 to reach the billing team." By enforcing a selection, robo-calls are unable to get past your phone tree, acting as a barrier to your staff and significantly reducing the instance of spam.

CALL VOLUME, 2019-2021

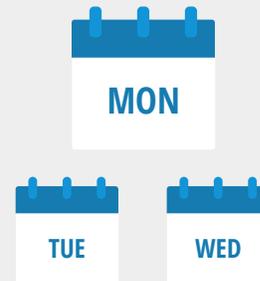


02

CONSISTENT PEAKS IN CALL VOLUME THROUGHOUT THE DAY AND WEEK

Looking at 2019, 2020, and 2021, we see consistent peaks in the days of the week and times of day that received the highest number of patient calls. In particular, **Mondays received the highest volume of calls, followed closely by Tuesdays and Wednesdays.** Furthermore, the **10:00 AM hour received the most calls for healthcare practices,** followed by 11:00 AM and 9:00 AM, respectively.

Despite the vast changes that occurred globally throughout these three years, patients continued to gravitate toward calling at the beginning of the week and during the mid-morning hours. Such consistent behavior allows practices to make decisions and enact best practices for their staff based on these high volume days and hours. **That said, it's important to analyze your own practice's unique trends.** For example, if you're open on Saturday for emergency or urgent appointments, perhaps you receive an influx of calls on Friday afternoons. In general, however, it would be wise for practices to make decisions that allow for a high volume of calls to be effectively managed toward the beginning of the week and mid-morning.

CALL VOLUME PEAKS, 2019–2021**TIME OF DAY****PEAK HOUR****DAY OF THE WEEK****PEAK DAY**

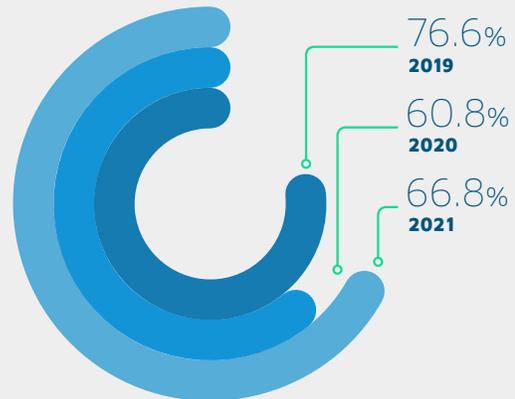
03

SLIGHT INCREASE IN CALL CONNECTION PERFORMANCE

Between 2019 and 2020, the rate of patient callers connected to a qualified individual who could help dropped from 76.6% to 60.8%. That means a shocking 39.2% of callers in 2020 never reached someone who could help or even had the opportunity to speak with a staff member. Given the stagnation of new patient acquisition that occurred in 2020, this drop was even more concerning as it prevented practices from capturing every opportunity for additional revenue.

In 2021, average call connection rose to 66.8%. While this is still subpar, it indicates that call connection is making incremental improvement. The two most prevalent reasons for poor call connection in 2021 were patients hanging up while on hold and being sent to voicemail to leave a message. With average hold times hovering around 2.5 minutes, it's a no-brainer why patients are giving up before speaking with a staff member. Furthermore, when a patient is unable to connect and leaves a message, prioritize a staff member reaching out as quickly as possible — ideally within two hours.

It's important that practices continue to prioritize and turn to both technology and operational processes to make improvement to call connection. For example, many healthcare practices find success in phone trees that help direct callers to their appropriate party without bogging down the front desk. Another technique to improve call connection is effectively leveraging texting to help alleviate high call volume, improve communication, and increase patient engagement.

CONNECT RATE, 2019-2021

04

**CALL CONNECTION SLUMPS
AT THE BEGINNING AND END
OF THE DAY**

When we talk about call connection, it's necessary to understand the times of day patients are struggling most to get the help they need. Looking between the typical business hours of 7:00 AM and 7:00 PM in 2021, **the lowest call connection performance occurred during the 7:00 AM hour, followed by 5:00 PM and 8:00 AM, respectively.** It should come as no surprise that patients are attempting to reach you when it's convenient for them, which is often first thing in the morning or at the end of their work day. It is, however, unfortunate that these key times are resulting in unanswered calls.

WORST HOUR

Depending on the volume of calls your practice is receiving during these hours, it may be wise to consider solutions that allow patients to be helped before and after your normal operating hours. For example, if you're noticing a high volume of calls coming in between 7:00 AM – 9:00 AM and you don't open until 9:00 AM, perhaps you have a staff member come in early to help man the phones and assist with patient requests first thing. Alternatively, many practices are now using call centers to work as an extension of their team after hours to not only answer the phone, but also handle simple requests and schedule appointments.

Another option would be to allow certain callers to be routed to a remote team member through a phone tree during designated hours before opening or after closing. By utilizing a phone tree, you can allow only emergency appointment requests or a particular subset of callers to be routed to an on-call team member who is equipped to handle calls when the office isn't open.

05

DECREASE IN SCHEDULED APPOINTMENTS

In 2021, the percent of patient opportunities scheduled for an appointment dropped considerably for both new and existing patients. In 2020, 61.0% of new patient opportunities calling into a practice were booked for an appointment. In 2021, that number sank to 56.3%. Similarly, in 2020, existing patient opportunities were booked at a rate of 77.9%, which dropped to 73.6% in 2021.

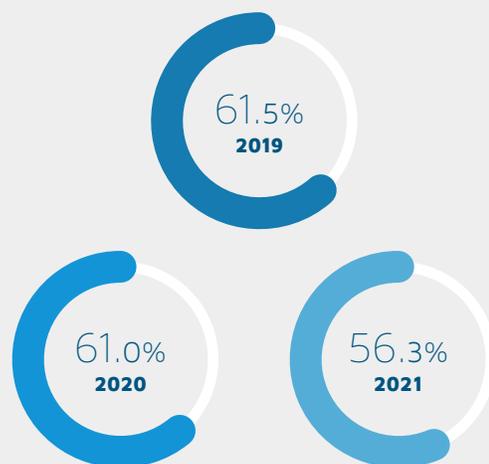
The three top patient objections to scheduling an appointment in 2021 were **service availability, calendar availability, and price**. While service availability may be a tough objection to immediately overcome, calendar and price offer a plethora of ways to combat patient objections.

First and foremost, many staff members get caught in the trap of answering patients' questions with a simple yes or no, without offering alternative options. For example, if a patient asks for an appointment tomorrow and you're booked up, it's easy to say, "Nope, sorry, we don't have any appointments tomorrow." Instead, try saying, "Our calendar is filled tomorrow, but I'd be happy to put you on a waitlist. In the meantime, our next available appointment is in two days from now. Would 10:00 AM or 2:00 PM work better for you?"

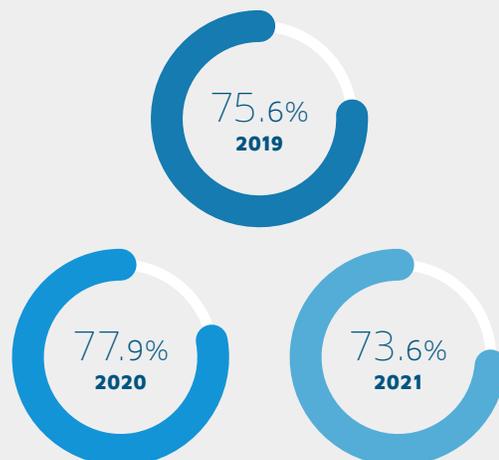
Similarly, we often hear staff members attempt to provide an exact price over the phone or flat out deny any request for a price. Instead, when a patient asks for a price, try saying, "It's difficult for me to give you an exact price without seeing your particular case. It would be best to have the doctor do an assessment and determine the best course of action. Would you be available Monday or Tuesday for a consultation?" It's important to address the patient's inquiry, but also guide them to the best course of action to get the help they need, which is predominately a scheduled appointment.

APPTS SCHEDULED, 2019-2021

NEW PATIENTS



EXISTING PATIENTS



LOOKING AHEAD

2021 remained a challenging year for many healthcare practices as they adjusted to a new normal of conducting regular operations. Despite the various priorities competing for staff's attention, it's important to continue to prioritize your practice's lifeline — the phone.

As we look ahead to 2022, there are a few trends we can expect to become more and more prevalent that practice managers will need to address:



The first is continued workplace flexibility as we see staff transitioning to fully remote and hybrid teams.



The second is the growth of call centers and greater utilization of third-party resources to handle high call volume.



Finally, we can expect healthcare practices to continue to adopt more advanced phone handling technology and become more sophisticated in their ability to route patient callers to improve call connection and better address high call volume.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about how Call Box is helping healthcare practices leverage the phone to improve call outcomes, operate more effectively, and capture more revenue:

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