



a trigger phrase check-up

by Joan Fox

phrases patients never want to hear

Trigger phrases are remarks that are ill advised in customer service situations. The designation “trigger” refers to the immediate negative reaction these phrases cause. Although some of them may not personally bother you, research (and some common sense) suggests it is best to avoid saying them at work.

“I’ll look into it.” This is considered the biggest brush off phrase today. The reason—so many people have been told “I’ll look into it” with absolutely no result. So even if you say it with the best intentions, the patient is probably thinking, “Yeah, right.” **The fix: Add specifics. State exactly what you will do as well as the time-frame.**

“Nobody else is having a problem with this.”

Essentially, you’ve just told the patient “You are the problem.” **The fix: Avoid the phrase as it doesn’t matter that no one else is having a problem. Always respond with empathy and address the issue presented to you.**

“We’re short staffed today.” Although this may be a reason for an unusually full waiting room or a delay in responding to a request, it sure sounds like an excuse. And even worse, those locations which use this as a standard phrase patients hear over and over again, appear mismanaged. **The fix: Address the patient request in the timeliest way possible. Apologize for the wait or the delayed response.**

“I don’t know why they told you that.”

This phrase, as well as “they just won’t do it” or similar phrases reflect poorly on the organization as they blame co-workers or management for a situation. **The fix: Acknowledge that the information is incorrect by saying something like, “It appears that we miscommunicated. The next step is to make an appointment with the radiology department for a scan.”**

“No problem.” This seems to be the customer service answer for any situation. Consider the following: “Thank you.” *No problem.* “You’re welcome.” *No problem.* “Would you fax that to me?” *No problem.* “I need a working pen.” *No problem.*

These two words have effectively replaced many meaningful interchanges. They are muttered in robot fashion by customer service providers everywhere. “No problem” is a habitual phrase devoid of any real meaning. Also, by saying “no problem” we’ve introduced minimalist language. **The fix: “I’d be happy to fax that to you.” “I’d be glad to help you out with that.”**

“I understand.” I bet you’re thinking, what could be wrong with that? After all, it is important to express understanding. The cause of the negative reaction to this phrase is that it has been said repeatedly with absolutely no attempt to really understand. Some have even said that this phrase basically means “shut up,” and we would never say that to a patient. **The fix: Listen to the patient and ask specific questions about their experience. When you do this, the patient will feel understood—and there will be no need to say “I understand.”**

