

# Appointment Dos and Don'ts

by Loretta Maxwell



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**W**HEN WE FIRST venture into private practice we are very meticulous about how we handle new clients. Building a good clientele is uppermost in our minds, and we are keenly aware that client/practitioner networking (the discipline known in other businesses as “customer relations”) is a key to success in our unique, personal care field. Also of special importance to us in the early days of business is our attention to good record keeping, detailed client case histories, and, of course, our precious appointment book.

Later in our career, after we have built up a solid client base reached that point where we mistakenly think we've learned everything there is to know about our work, there may be a tendency to let some of our old personal rules of conduct slide. We allow ourselves to believe that some of the “vitaly important rules” of earlier days – rules that may have been a big part of our past success – are not as critical as we once thought. Things become routine; we are not as strict with ourselves as we once were, and we are persuaded that we “Don't have to knock ourselves out any more.” Such shortsighted thinking can have grave consequences for someone involved in a line of work that is as specialized as electrolysis.

If you get to the point where you think there is nothing more to making a client appointment than just scribbling the person's name in a school exercise book, it's probably time to revisit the entire subject of “Appointment Dos and Don'ts.” The first lesson to be *re*learned about making client appointments is that there are a large number of things you can do to ensure that a potential client will book an appointment with *you* – rather than book with another electrologist.

Making an appointment easy and comfortable for the client is always our first duty. New clients arriving at our office for a consultation will expect the place to be clean and businesslike, and they will want to hear confident and knowledgeable answers to their questions. Soft background music is nice, information pamphlets are appreciated, and a friendly practitioner attitude and perfect grooming are indispensable. Attention to these details demonstrates an electrologist's interest in serving the newcomer, and increases the likelihood that they will become faithful and satisfied clients.

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It is essential that we be as truthful as possible. For example, if we get a client that has a large amount of hair to be removed from the bikini area, and we give her an estimate of just a few hours to clear it entirely, that is dishonesty that will go against us in the long run. Sure, we'll get her for the first few appointments, but when she realizes that our estimate isn't anywhere near the actual time required to finish a large bikini area, she's going to be very disillusioned, maybe to the point of canceling future appointments. Certainly, she will not be recommending our services to anyone else.

A big decision all electrologists with a one-person office have to make is whether they will answer the telephone and take appointments while they are working on another client. I personally do. Unless, of course, a new client indicates that she dislikes my talking on the telephone during her treatment session. If that is the case, *I don't do it!* – I let the answering machine take all my calls. Needless to say, the machine is always on during consultations.

### First Impressions

If, when I'm answering the telephone, it is inconvenient or inappropriate to discuss a caller's personal details or to make an appointment, I do everything I can to get the prospective client's number, so that I can call her back at a time that is more suitable to both of us.

Since almost all 'first appointments' are made via the telephone, we must constantly remind ourselves that the client's first (and most important) impression of us is made during this initial call. And though we may have heard the "same-old hair problems" repeated many, many times before, by other clients, this may well be the only time *this* client has ever discussed her hair problem with anyone. So if they ask questions that we think sound silly or dumb – like, "Can you really take out all the hair permanently?" – we shouldn't get irate and say, "What do we think I'm doing here?" And if they tell us "I shaved one time, and now I have twice as much hair," this is not the moment to give them a lecture on the dynamics of hair growth. Later on, when we have demonstrated permanent hair removal and won the client's confidence, there will be time enough to talk about shaving and the hair growth cycle.

It is the show of concern and sympathy

that is important in making these nervous, first-time callers feel relaxed and comfortable enough to take the plunge and make that first appointment with us. Of course, if they have been referred by a doctor or recommended by another client, things go a lot smoother. Even then, it's a good idea to talk to them for a while, to put them at ease.

### "How much do you charge?"

It is not uncommon to get calls from people who are just phoning to find out what our fees are. If you give them your rates for one-hour and quarter-hour sessions, these callers will usually (but not always) thank you, hang up, and call the next electrologist in the Yellow Pages. As much as we might want these people as clients, there is nothing to be gained by simply giving them our prices over the telephone. We must be able to talk to them long enough to find out what their problem is, and explain to them that the total cost will depend on how large an area has to be worked on, the type of hair, and what may have been done in the past – such as waxing or tweezing – to remove the hair.

The only sensible way to talk about such matters, of course, is in consultation with a professional electrologist, in the privacy of her office. So what I do, when someone calls and asks how much I charge, is ask what area of the body is to be worked on. If they say it's the upper lip, I ask if the hair is all the way across her lip or just on the outer edges? Next, I ask what they've been doing to remove the hair. When I have this information, I might say, "Since you only have hair on the outer edges of your upper lip, and since you have never done anything to remove the hair, we probably will need only 15 minutes each visit, and the cost of that is X-amount of dollars. Then you might have to come in only once a month until the hair is gone: that could be 2-4 hours of work to complete the lip."

I *never* underestimate the length of treatment time: I prefer to have the client pleasantly surprised when the area is cleared more quickly than anticipated.

A quick, provisional estimate given over the telephone is acceptable only if the electrologist believes there is no other way of getting the potential client into the office for the complimentary consultation. As we all know, many people have a different idea of "a few hairs on the corners of the lip."

If, on closer personal inspection, it became obvious to me that the client had hair all the way across her lip and that she had been waxing it for years, I would inform her that we might have to work on her every week for 30 - 45 minutes each visit, and that it might take 6 - 8 hours of work. And based on my personal experience I would anticipate that the client – after receiving all the information about her problem and gaining confidence in my capabilities as her electrologist – would readily make an appointment and have the work begin.

### Selling ourselves

Whenever a potential client enquires about our electrolysis services we should be well prepared to give her more than a few good reasons for coming to us for treatments – rather than going to one of our competitors. And we must be able to accomplish this without bad-mouthing those competitors (regardless of who they are or what alternative method of hair removal they offer).

If we've been in business a long time, that's something we can brag about: To boast about it doesn't imply that we are *better* than our competitors, but it does suggest that we must be "doing something right!" If we have a license to teach electrolysis, that is a wonderful recommendation and we should certainly get *that* message across, too. But even something as simple as having one's business just two blocks from the client's workplace or just one block from the bus stop, could be a key selling point.

If we give a first-time caller what she thinks are all the right answers, she will probably make her first appointment right there and then. But when this happens, I like to have them repeat after me the appointed day, date and time (e.g. Wednesday, March 7th.), because these first-time clients have a reputation for showing up at the wrong hour, or even the wrong day, with the explanation, "Oh, I thought you meant this week," or "I thought Tuesday was the 7th."

After we have worked on a client for the first time, we'll be able to tell her how often she needs to come in and how long her appointments should be. It's always best to have the client make a standing appointment, that way it's easier for her to remember her "regular time," and she

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will not be always calling at the last minute, to ask if we can “fit her in.”

### **Dealing with “no-shows”**

Next, we have to talk about no-shows. “To charge, or not to charge? That is the question!” In my office, the first time someone fails to show up for their appointment I telephone them and say something like, “You’ve been so good about appointments in the past, so I won’t charge you this time.” Or I might say, “I won’t charge you the full amount this first time, I’ll take off half the usual amount.” (The reduced fee makes the client feel like they’re getting a good deal, and they like that, but the cost to them is often enough to discourage them from becoming a repeat offender.) However, an electrologist who charges for no-shows is under obligation to warn the clientele of this policy — on the client appointment cards and on a sign clearly posted in the reception area.

When a client doesn’t show up, we can’t help but get a bit upset, especially if the session was planned as a long one (slotted in prime time) and we got to the office early for this client, or stayed late for them. But if we show anger in our voice when we talk to them about it later, our chances of losing them as a client become very great (as much out of embarrassment as anything else). What I usually say after a no-show is something like, “Are you OK? I was concerned about you when you didn’t show up for your appointment.” Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances, and we certainly don’t want to antagonize someone who has had a death in the family or personally been involved in a serious accident of some kind. But in most cases, I have found that missing an appointment is usually no more than a gross oversight on the client’s part. They just plain forgot!

I know there are electrologists who demand their full fee from clients who fail to show for their appointment, and I have talked to electrologists who say they have clients that *repeatedly* miss their treatments, pay their bills willingly and without argument, and complacently make a new appointment for a later date. I have also heard of electrologists who simply refuse to book a known no-show ever again. I suppose there is no “one rule fits all” policy on this one. Practitioners have to decide what is best for them.

People who constantly cancel appointments on the same day, or shortly before the appointment time, are another problem. These clients can be almost as bad as the no-shows. There may be good reasons

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for such cancellations once or twice – such as ill health or work obligations – but beyond that it is bad business. If we are flippant, or just too laid back with these clients who are always late or always canceling at the last minute, they soon get the notion that their canceling isn't important to us, and that it's OK to continue. On the other hand, if we lean too far the other way, and get angry or too harsh about it, we will probably lose these clients.

When I receive a treatment cancellation call at the last minute I usually make it clear to the client that my time is valuable and that late cancellations give me insufficient notice to get in touch with other clients who might be anxious to have that time spot. This at least, lets the canceling client know that the matter is important to me.

It's also a good idea to keep a list of those people who we know are usually willing to fill the gap when invited to do so on short notice. I always keep such a list handy for these occasions, and I also make a record of those clients who are prone to let me down at the last minute.

If someone has a 30-minute or 1-hour appointment and they are 10 minutes late (and the next scheduled client is already waiting in the reception area), we should, of course, take 10 minutes off the latecomer's time. However, I am personally very flexible in this matter and *will* give the latecomer full treatment time – as long as it *doesn't inconvenience anyone else*.

But what about charging those latecomers when we are *not* able to give them the full time that was planned? If we are new in business, we might try it both ways and see how we feel about it. Personally I have found that catering to the client and keeping her happy will keep her coming back, which is more important to me than the relatively little amount of money she would owe me for my lost time. Naturally, if it were to happen more than once or twice with the same client, I would want to reconsider this policy.

### **What if we don't do men?**

If a man telephones to make an electrolysis appointment and we don't want to work on him for some reason – like, if he says he wants to have his pubic hair removed – what do we do? Well, we *don't hang up on him*, or say something unkind; that's not professional, and it offends. The least we can do is direct him to a professional colleague who *will* help him. If we make it a general rule not to work on men below the waist, it's a good idea to always have handy the telephone

numbers of one or two electrologists in our area (with whom a previous arrangement has been made) that are prepared to take these clients, and who will appreciate the referrals.

But there is a cardinal rule here. If doing electrolysis below a man's waist is something that we cannot or do not want to do, we must not allow ourselves to be drawn into conversation on this subject with the caller. There are definitely a few flakes out there. And if, after having told the caller we don't do this work, he asks if we've ever had work done on our own bikini area, *don't go there!* I made that mistake 26 years ago. The conversation quickly got too intimate, before I could get out of the situation gracefully.

### **Keeping the record straight**

Now, about organizing the appointments, and keeping the record straight. There are many different kinds of appointment books available at office supplies stores, ranging from the small, purse-size types to huge things with many categories and multiple columns. Some electrologists have the equivalent of an appointment book on their computer. No matter what form it takes, there is only one really essential requirement for an electrologist's appointment book: Its divisions of time must be broken down into 15-minute segments. Other than that, it's a question of what the individual electrologist finds most comfortable. However it looks, it doesn't take long for this book to become the most important object in our office. It is our business bible. Our lives revolve around it.

Some electrologists book their appointments back-to-back, all day long, while others book two in a row – leaving occasional catch-up spaces. When making appointments over the telephone, I have found it expedient to give the client verbal options like: "Do you need an appointment for after work, or can you come in the daytime?" If she says "daytime" I ask, "Do you prefer morning or late in the day?" First-time callers who are new to electrolysis often don't know what is involved or what it is that they want, so they appreciate this multiple-choice questioning. And it's surprising how effective the procedure is when you're very busy and you need to speed things up a bit.

When someone calls in for an appointment far in advance – without preference for a particular day of the week – I always give them a Monday or Tuesday. If I have any 15-minute gaps in my Thursday and Friday schedules I leave them open as long as possible, so that I can accommo-

date those clients who always call me at the last minute to tell me they've got social activities going on this weekend and can they see me right away for a "15-minute clean-up."

At every opportunity, I remind my clients of the importance of proper scheduling and the need for keeping regular appointments, to obtain the best results. If a client can't make a standing appointment I make sure that her next appointment is set up before she leaves the office – and if she doesn't immediately jot it down in her notebook or palm pilot, I insist that she takes one of my appointment cards.

### **Heading for the door**

When it comes to collecting payment for our work, there are a few more little hints that are worth consideration. For example, if you receive payment ahead of time for future appointments, you can save your client (and yourself) from any misunderstanding later on by reminding them, right at the beginning, that there may be times when you are running behind schedule and they will have to accept a 58-minute hour or a 28-minute half-hour treatment.

The "pay as you go clients" are a large part of this problem for the electrologist who works alone. Some clients like to get into conversation while they're settling their account or booking their next appointment. Others may take a very long time to write their check. If I have a delay of this kind, and I know my next appointment is in the waiting room, I might open the door and say, "I'll just be a minute," or I will sometimes ask the client who is writing her check to do it in the waiting room and push it under the treatment room door before she leaves. If a client is in a chatty mood, but doesn't have anything important or urgent to discuss, I will usually say something like, "I enjoy talking to you, but my next client is waiting. Can we continue on your next visit?" (I also might be opening the waiting room door by this time.) Without a set of rules of this kind, the electrologist can soon get off course and be miles behind schedule by the time she reaches the end of her normal workday.

To finalize this collection of "Appointment Dos and Don'ts" I want to pass along a very personal tip (an adage, really) for maintaining a valuable and effective appointment book: Put everything in writing, but do it all in pencil. The time you write a client's information down in ink, is for sure the time when the client doesn't show up! *JK*