Killer Viruses

These profit killers lurk inside your practice, not your computer.

BY WILLIAM J. LYNOTT

We all know how devastating a computer virus can be, but not everyone is aware of the destructive viruses that can infect a professional practice. Unlike computer viruses, these profit killers aren’t transmitted through cyberspace; they grow and fester within the infected practice strictly from internal causes.

Here are nine of the most common killer viruses along with the antidotes you need to keep them from infecting your practice:

1. Telephone Sickness and How to Cure It

Your telephone can be a powerful practice builder or a destructive practice killer. Every time a patient or potential patient dials your number, it’s a request for information or help—the kind of information or help that may turn a prospect into a new patient. Any failure to deliver skillfully on these needs indicates the unerring presence of the Telephone Sickness virus.

Inoculate your practice against telephone sickness by training everyone in your office to understand the importance of one of your most powerful business tools—the telephone—and the urgent need for treating every caller with courtesy and respect.

In particular, make sure that your telephone is always answered promptly. Never allow it to ring more than three or four times, and make sure that everyone identifies himself or herself by name in a cheery voice.

Never leave a caller on hold for more than a minute or two is one of the surest signs of telephone sickness.

Leaving a patient on hold for more than a minute or two is one of the surest signs of telephone sickness.

Continued on page 76
**Killer Viruses** *(from page 75)*

2. **The Invisible Low-Performer**

   Even one slacker in your operation constitutes an internal virus that will eat away at productivity, profits, and patient confidence.

   Dealing with an under-performing employee is a challenging task for most practicing podiatrists, but failing to face up to the problem will make a bad situation even worse. It can result in added stress on other employees who may have to take up the slack, and resentment among those who can’t understand why the offender is allowed to continue on.

   The cure? Show your top performing employees how much you value their work and that you won’t tolerate a slacker.

3. **The Tardy Invoice**

   Do you send bills directly to any of your patients? Of course, it’s best to adhere strictly to a pay-as-you-go philosophy, with no exceptions. However, if you do billing for anyone, never forget that neglecting money owed to you can be devastating to your cash flow. It’s essential not to allow your receivables to go untended. You’ve earned that money; you have a right to it; you need it.

   You can slay the Tardy Invoice virus by setting up a fool-proof system for promptly sending out an invoice or reminder to every patient who owes you money, and by following through relentlessly on every late payment. This is as important to your financial success as the quality and professionalism of the services you offer. If your patients learn that you are cavalier about money owed to you, you can be certain they will stretch your patience (and your cash flow) to the limit.

4. **The Faultless Doctor**

   The Faultless Doctor virus would have you believe that it’s always someone else’s fault when things go wrong. This is a common virus among practice owners and managers and it eats away at practice success in several different ways.

   Former President Harry S. Truman eliminated the Faultless Manager virus from his presidency when he coined the phrase, “The buck stops here.” By acknowledging his willingness to shoulder the blame when things went wrong, Truman put his subordinates and constituents on notice that he wasn’t a finger pointer.

   If your associates feel that you’re never willing to shoulder even part of the blame for practice miscues, they’ll withdraw from the kinds of decision-making and innovative thinking that could make your life easier and your practice more successful.

   Inoculate yourself from the Faultless Manager virus by a willingness to shoulder at least part of the blame instead of pointing an accusing finger. Consider the possibility that your instructions weren’t clear, or that the instructions weren’t followed as directed.

5. **The Invisible Employee Virus**

   In the course of your demanding schedule, it’s all too easy to fall into a pattern of superficial contacts with employees. Consider this exchange between a podiatrist and an employee passing in a hallway:

   **Employee:** “Good morning, Dr. Smith; looks like we’re going to have a nice day.”

   **Boss:** “Fine, thank you. And how are you?”

   That sort of disconnect between an employee and a busy boss is all too common today, and a sure sign of the presence of the Invisible Employee virus. This virus preys on the susceptibility of many workers at all levels of our workplace hierarchy who are starving for individual recognition and the essential dignity that goes along with it. Failing to supply it provides a perfect setting for the loss of initiative, lowered work ethic, and destructive depression on the part of the offended employees.

   Fortunately, banning the Invisible Employee virus is easy for the busiest practitioners. One of the simplest and most effective ways to develop and demonstrate sincere interest in your employees is to take the time to find out something about each one, including such simple things as the names of wife and children, or employee hobbies or special interests, and then following through from time-to-time with questions that show you are genuinely interested.

6. **The Foggy Instruction Virus**

   Do you think that the direction and instructions you give to employees and patients are always crystal clear? If you think so, there’s a good chance that you’re wrong. The ability to communicate with precision doesn’t come naturally to most of us, regardless of the extent of our education and practice experience.

   Industrial psychologists studying the effectiveness of communications among humans uncovered an astonishing weakness in this vital area of our lives. Much of the problem, they...
say, is the result of a limited vocabulary and the way many of us choose our words.

If you’ve ever been frustrated by the failure of an associate to follow your instructions or carry out a project the way you intended, it’s quite possible that the fault was your own, that you failed to make your instructions unmistakably clear. Too often, we assume that everyone will, or should, understand everything we say or write; this situation provides a happy breeding ground for the Foggy Instruction Virus.

Of particular concern these days is the communication of information or instructions by way of e-mail, a tricky and especially difficult medium for any but the simplest of messages. Arguably, there is no other communication medium as susceptible to misunderstanding as the hastily composed e-mail.

Trying to pinpoint the blame for specific incidents of miscommunication probably isn’t worth the effort. Still, there is little room for doubt that the heaviest share of responsibility for effective and profitable practice communication rests with the person assigning the task, not the person on the receiving end.

Some years ago, a detailed study on business owners and managers revealed that a broad vocabulary was the

While adequate wages are a fundamental requirement for employee satisfaction, money isn’t the only motivation for most workers.

most often seen characteristic in successful executives.

That’s not surprising when you consider that words are the only tools we have for communicating our thoughts to others. Because a manager must get things done largely through the efforts of others, the ability to express thoughts with clarity and precision is an obvious necessity.

Dr. Wilfred Funk in his classic book, Words of Power, said, “Success and vocabulary go hand-in-hand.” Another educator, Dr. John Dewey, said simply, “Thought is impossible without words.” Henry Thomas made a similar observation when he wrote, “Words are the materials out of which we build our thoughts.”

These sentiments, echoed by countless experts, lead to an inescapable conclusion: Since words are necessary in the formation of our thoughts, an expanded vocabulary will improve the quality of our thinking. However, they say, you should not take the job of building a powerful vocabulary to mean the relentless addition of exotic words just for the sake of sheer numbers—quite to the contrary. The most appropriate word will seldom be the

Continued on page 78
longest or most obscure one. The possessor of an unnecessarily large vocabulary runs the constant risk of being misunderstood.

The trick is to master enough words to allow clear expression of your thoughts without resorting to the use of words that are beyond the understanding of all but college professors.

To be sure, effective communications can be an elusive target. But podiatrists who make a sincere effort to improve their skill in expressing themselves and their ability to understand others will gain an important advantage on the road to practice success by inoculating themselves against the Foggy Instruction Virus.

7. The Failure to Guard Your Most Precious Business Asset

If you have one or more employees, they form the bedrock of your practice. While adequate wages are a fundamental requirement for employee satisfaction, money isn’t the only motivation for most workers. Recognition for a job well done and respect for individual effort are important contributors to low employee turnover and high productivity.

Non-financial rewards such as a dinner out, suggestion boxes with rewards for usable suggestions, and other incentives are valuable at any time; but they take on special importance when circumstances limit your ability to increase wages.

8. The No Unique Identity Virus

America’s most successful entrepreneurs, gigantic or tiny, are those who have carefully developed an identity all their own. Your job is to evaluate your strengths and then combine them to form a unique identity—an identifiable image for you and your practice.

Perhaps you’ve been practicing longer than your nearest competitors; or maybe you have a reputation for a high degree of professionalism. Whatever your marketable strengths, you should write them all down, study them, and then determine how to separate yourself from your competitors—how to motivate potential patients to seek you out, and existing patients to feel fortunate to have discovered you.

9. The Failure to Prepare an Exit Plan Virus

Writing in his newsletter, Exit Planning Review, professional exit planner and author, John H. Brown, Golden, Colorado, said he knows of only eight ways to leave a business or professional practice:

- Transfer it to a family member;
- Sell it to one or more key employees;
- Sell to key employees using an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP);
- Sell it to one or more co-owners;
- Sell to an outside third party;
- Engage in an Initial Public Offering;
- Retain ownership but become a passive owner;
- Liquidate

While an initial public offering (IPO) is the least likely possibility for a podiatric practice, chances are that one of the other seven paths is best for you; but which one? And which one would be disastrous for you or your heirs? Whether your retirement is just around the corner or many years away, you owe it to yourself to begin considering these questions right now.

“A well designed exit plan has many advantages,” says business intermediary Richard H. Marsh, Jenkintown, PA. “Among other things, a good plan will help the owner to maximize the value of the business. It will also make it possible for the owner to leave the business under her own terms at the time of her own choosing.”

“My partner and I believe that professionals and business owners should plan for their exit at least two years prior to leaving, if not longer,” says Fred Hageman, Hageman, Stansberry & Associates, Cameron Park, CA. “And you should have a clear understanding of what it will mean when you make your exit. Will your departure be merely a function of training your children or heirs to take over? If so, do you plan to have any passive involvement, like being a minority owner? If you have such a plan, do you have a written agreement in place outlining compensation or other benefits?”

Many practitioners plan to stay on in a part-time role after they retire in order to help a family member, a common arrangement in professional practices.

In some ways, it’s understandable why a practitioner will neglect planning for the future. “With so much time spent servicing patients, dealing with human resource issues, ensuring that there’s enough cash to pay the bills, and still trying to eke out some semblance of a family life, most practitioners neglect planning for their eventual exit,” says exit planning professional and CPA, Greg Austin, Saint Louis, MO. “That’s unfortunate because one thing is certain; eventually every practitioner must eventually exit the business.”

Banning these nine Killer Virus(es) from your operation won’t be a magic bullet to cure all of your practice ills, but it will be a big help in your efforts to build further on your existing practice success. PM

“A well designed exit plan has many advantages,” says business intermediary

Richard H. Marsh, Jenkintown, PA.

Bill Lynott is a management consultant, author and lecturer who writes on business and financial topics for a number of publications. His latest book, Money: How to Make the Most of What You’ve Got is available in bookstores. You can reach Bill at lynott@verizon.net or through his website: www.blynott.com