



Call Handling ... "What are your options?"

If your business cannot justify a full time receptionist, then you're not alone. It's very common. Professionals and small business owners alike need to work to generate income, and they can't afford to have staff sitting around waiting for the phone to ring.



What happens when you are busy? A phone ringing out gives a poor impression to customers, and new customers may simply go elsewhere.

If you have voicemail then you may get a message, but many people dislike company voicemail - it's not the same as personal voicemail - when you call a business you expect someone to answer.

The solution could be to use a Call Handling Service, and many do. There are plenty of options around and deciding on the right one can be difficult so, here are a few consider that might help.

Telephone Answering Services

This type of service is also referred to as a Messaging Service or Virtual Receptionist, and some companies refer to the Call Handler as "your PA". Whatever their title they essentially answer your calls, take messages and pass them on. Some are starting to offer additional services, such as, booking appointments which might be useful.

The market is dominated by a small number of specialist companies with systems designed to handle high call volumes, employing large numbers of call handlers. Call Handlers may work from a central office or from home, connected via sophisticated telephony and IT systems. They will answer calls in your name and deliver messages to you via email or text message. It's simple, efficient and works well.

The downside is it lacks the personal touch. Callers rarely get the same person twice and customers soon realise that these people don't know you or your business. It's a common complaint. Also, they tend not to advertise the prices and the charges can be complex so you may end up paying more than expected – something to watch out for.

Serviced Office Receptionists

If you occupy a serviced office then an in-house Telephone Answering Service may be provided by the Reception staff. This should be convenient and more personal - the Receptionist is likely to know you already, and may have a system to track your movements too.

The service is likely to be restricted to office hours, with after-hours calls going to voicemail. It may also work out more expensive than a specialist Call Answering Service, but it will be more personal. Some serviced offices offer this as part of a range of business support services, which might be an added benefit, although our research has shown these service packages to vary greatly and have declined in recent years as virtual services become more popular.



Independent Virtual Assistants

There are hundreds of independent Virtual Assistants around who offer a personal service. It's like having your own Virtual PA to answer calls and perform a wide range of Personal or Office Administration tasks. They can act as an employee, often working from your email domain, and will get to know your business intimately.

The problem with hiring individuals is that they could be working on another client's task or taking another call, and they have to take breaks, have holidays and occasionally they get sick. Perhaps your typing can wait, but if your calls go to Voicemail you're no better off.

Typically, VAs do not like Call Handling because they're not setup for it and it ties them to their desk so, if this is important, you should think carefully about this option.

Virtual Office Services Providers

There are much fewer of these than Independent VAs and they operate as a professional services business. They will have a team of VAs supported by smart IT systems and technical backup.

Your VA will answer your calls and deal with a range of office admin tasks. They will be covered by one or two other VAs who will also get to know you – and they will work as a team, just as in a large organisation. Because they work in small teams, the service will be personal.

Some providers may operate a standard Telephone Answering Service in the background to provide 24/7 cover and to handle peak time overflow calls – it's re-assuring to have that backup

Their Call Handling Service tends to be simple and cheaper than using a specialist Telephone Answering Services. This is because it's designed purely to complement the VA services, providing more routing and answering options for their clients.

With all these options, what is it that people seem to be looking for?

In our experience, most people want a personal service, not a call centre. They want a consistent, reliable service (often 24/7) that's affordable. Everyone wants to know where they stand upfront with the cost and they want flexibility, with no shocks, contracts or switching difficulties.

If you would like to find out more about Office Lifeline their [Call Handling Services](#), you can contact me on 01926 659 120, or via email at anna@office-lifeline.co.uk.

About the author

Anna Isaacs is the founder of Office Lifeline, a Warwickshire based virtual office services business, providing virtual PA and Office Admin Services to professionals and businesses. Anna had a successful career as an Executive PA in several blue chip companies before setting up Office Lifeline in early 2007.

