



HIPAA

A GUIDE TO SHOPPING FOR AN ANSWERING SERVICE FOR **HEALTHCARE BUSINESSES**

The purpose of this paper is to help educate business owners and managers in the healthcare field how to shop for an answering service. This is an exploration into how healthcare businesses have unique requirements when shopping for a new service and what factors these businesses should consider before partnering with an answering service or contact center.

Shopping for an answering service for your healthcare business can be a difficult task. From different billing methods to account features, it's hard to truly compare one service to another. However, your business communications are extremely important to your company, so it is crucial to thoroughly and properly evaluate an answering service before selecting one.

And, while shopping for a new answering service is difficult for any business, in the healthcare field there are unique and critical considerations.

HIPAA COMPLIANCE IS A REQUIREMENT, NOT AN OPTION

A main difference between healthcare businesses and businesses in other industries is that healthcare companies must follow standards and requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). The implementation of this legislation involves privacy and security of personal health information (PHI). Besides the 1996 Act, the HIPAA Omnibus Rule went into effect in 2013 and places major restrictions on the electronic transmission of PHI.

If you own or operate a business in the medical field, then you may already understand HIPAA and how it directly affects your business. If you don't understand HIPAA requirements, then you may suffer the consequences of non-compliance, which carries a maximum penalty of \$1.5 million per year, depending on the level of negligence and this figure doesn't include damages and losses to your business. Obviously, HIPAA compliance in every area of your business, including your answering service, should be a top priority.

How does HIPAA have an impact on what answering service to choose? The HIPAA Omnibus Rule states that text messages, emails (encrypted or not), voicemail, and faxes are all non-compliant methods of transmitting PHI. If an answering service handles your business communications, then it is most likely handling PHI. If all electronic methods of transmitting PHI listed aren't HIPAA-compliant, then how can an answering service work for you?

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There are HIPAA-compliant answering services that implement the use of secure message portals, mobile apps, and security procedures that address HIPAA regulations and are compliant. These services know and abide by specific rules that are in place due to HIPAA laws.

AnswerFirst, a HIPAA-compliant answering service, offers a mobile app (miSecure Messaging) that allows healthcare business partners to receive secure messages on mobile devices. The app protects clients, data, and organizations via encrypted messaging. The encrypted messaging techniques utilized in miSecure Messaging meet HIPAA standards.

Additionally, AnswerFirst's customer service professionals receive HIPAA training to know how to follow particular procedures, ensuring security and privacy of accounts that handle PHI. Plus, AnswerFirst's secure client Web portal, Client Web Access (CWA) meets HIPAA regulation requirements for managing PHI.

With the stiff penalties for non-compliance, it's essential that healthcare providers only consider partnerships with answering services that meet HIPAA's requirements.

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RELIABILITY IS IMPORTANT

Service reliability is arguably important to any medical company that's looking to outsource management of its business communications. Therefore, an answering service's reliability should be one of the top considerations in the selection process. Healthcare businesses deal with life-and-death emergency situations where routing communication accurately and in a timely manner is absolutely crucial.

How can you find an answering service that's reliable?
Conduct research about its:

- **Infrastructure**
- **Contingency Plan for unexpected system failures**

If an answering service cannot provide details about these important factors, then it probably will not be reliable and could cost you a lot more in the end.



As part of vetting a service, ask about redundancy in its infrastructure. If the answering service has no redundancy, and it's affected by an Internet outage or software failure your business may pay the price in lost calls, messages, texts, etc. For healthcare companies, these types of losses can be catastrophic.

Receive and review the answering service's Service Level Agreement (SLA), which should include information about the service's availability or guaranteed uptime, and abandonment rate percentage of inbound communications that terminate prior to being answered (e.g. calls, emails, text messages, chats, etc.). Essentially, the SLA provides a promised availability. Look for a guaranteed uptime of at least 99.9% and an abandonment rate of 5% or less. If the answering service doesn't have a SLA, then it is not guaranteeing any reliability. Don't take that risk.

Finally, review the answering service's Time to Answer (ATTA) rate. This metric tells you how quickly a service answers calls. Neither patients or providers want emergency calls to sit in a hold queue.

SHOP FOR FEATURES

Answering services do a lot more than just answer phone calls. For a healthcare business, additional features and services are important. Healthcare providers may need paging services for after-hours emergencies, on-call surgeons, or Code Blue cases. Doctor-to-doctor communications, delivery of lab results, and estimated time of arrival (ETA) trauma alerts are other healthcare-specific services that not every answering service provides.

Also, some answering services can integrate with the scheduling portion of some electronic health record (EHR) software, which is a beneficial feature. This integration with EHR software allows you to outsource scheduling appointments to the answering service while still meeting HIPAA standards for protection of PHI.

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Ask for a list of services available, as well as previous clients to help you evaluate which answering service to select. A superior answering service might be able to provide service options that you never considered or knew about. An established and effective answering service educates existing and potential clients how to implement its suite of services to streamline business communications.

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SHOP FOR A POSITIVE REPUTATION

To avoid legal consequences and financial penalties for non-compliance with HIPAA, shop for an answering service with a positive reputation. Research potential answering services thoroughly by asking questions, reading online reviews, and requesting information about partnerships.

A high-quality answering service will have superior online ratings and provide you with detailed information about how it successfully works with other healthcare businesses.

CONCLUSION

While HIPAA compliance is the first thing to consider when selecting an answering service, it is not the only factor involved. Reliability, features, and reputation play roles, as well. Contemplate all these factors as you shop for an answering service for your healthcare business.

READY TO GET STARTED?

Contact AnswerFirst at 1-800-645-2616 or visit their website at answerfirst.com.

