Collaborating and connecting in the dental space

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Communication skills are an integral part of our daily lives. How we communicate defines who our friends are, what our families think of us, and how our businesses are perceived by the community at large. Typically, when you think about communicating, you think about it in relation to your friends and family. We spend countless hours thinking about how we speak to other people, what effect it has on them, whether we should have said something or not, or if other people think we’re upset with them or frustrated based on our words and actions.

Oh wait!

Actions. That’s another part of communicating that many people don’t think about. How your body moves in rhythm with the way you’re talking can have a major effect on what people perceive you to be saying. Our bodies and mouths move in a dynamic that we don’t yet really understand, but our subconscious selves do. Have you ever gotten that feeling that even though someone was apologising to you, they didn’t really mean it? Or that someone was really upset when they told you that everything was fine? Why do you think that you get those feelings? Something about the way that that person is communicating with you—other than with their words—is telling you that.

A second aspect of actions is your actual actions. We’ve all heard the saying “actions speak louder than words.” Well, it’s true. If you say one thing and do something completely different, that’s a form of communicating. If you’re always consistent in the way you approach a problem, or situation, that’s also a form of communicating. How you conduct yourself both personally and professionally is a way to communicate the person you are and what you stand for. The most important part of that is that people actually take notice.

When bad goes good

In 1995, Tylenol had a problem. Many bottles of its medication had been tampered with and would prove to be dangerous or fatal if ingested. Right away, the company recalled its entire product and
spent a huge amount of time and money figuring out what went wrong and in making sure that no one became ill—all at the expense of its brand image. The company did the right thing and stood by its values. Here’s the kicker—while it thought that posting this recall would destroy its company image, it actually bolstered it. People found it extremely admirable that the company was more than willing to tarnish its own reputation and spend huge amounts of money to stand by its values. They stood by Tylenol. Tylenol had communicated to people that it was an ethical company and that communication was heard loud and clear.

Some people and companies don’t care what other people think of them. In fact, some actually thrive on their inability to communicate and the dislike people feel for them as a result. Take Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan or Kim Kardashian. These three women are all celebrities who communicate a terrible image and are famous for it. They succeed because people don’t like them and are just itching to figure out what they’re going to do next.

Communicating

However, a terrible image is not what most people (and especially companies) want. People naturally want other people to like them. They want to be seen as people who stand by their values, can get their point across, and can do so without projecting the image of being mean, frustrated or impatient. As something that many people strive to do, communicating effectively has been discussed extensively in our society. Countless seminars and training programmes have been conducted that deal with communicating with people. Even more books have been written on the subject.

So why is how we communicate so important? Good question. Communication is important because it gives others an idea of what we think, who we are, and what we stand for. This is extremely important in your personal life. It’s even more important in your professional life. How others perceive you can have a huge impact on how smoothly your office runs, how many new patients you get, and how easy doing business with other people is. Communicating is at the crux of how we function as a society and your ability to function well from a communication standpoint will have huge impacts on your personal and professional life.

One thing that has already been mentioned is how solid communication leads to a smoother internal business process, bringing in more patients (or retaining returning patients), and working together more efficiently with others in the dental space.

How?

Let me break each of those aspects down for you to show how increased communication skills can help you in each of those areas.

The first major area that is going to affect how you communicate is your internal business processes. How you communicate internally within your office can have a huge impact on how smooth your operations are, how happy your staff are, or even what your monthly expenses are. All of these things can be improved by communicating more efficiently and effectively within your organisation. Huge mistakes can be made in business through a failure to communicate or a lack of understanding among team members. Take Morgan Stanley as an example. Recently, they made a US$2 billion blunder that has led to increased surveillance of all US banks by the government, an investigation into the company, a huge drop in their stock price, and the resignation of some of the top performers and managers at the company. Why was this mistake made? Someone messed up because of a lack of communication.
Think about how you communicate with others within the office on a daily basis. The key is to recognise that not all communication is verbal. Reflect on how information is processed, received, transferred, and stored within your company. Then reflect on whether those processes are effective and if everything is being communicated the way it should be. With patients, think about how you and your staff come across. Do patients generally have a good sense of what they’re getting into when they come to your office? Are they aware of after-care procedures and processes? Do they ever seem confused? Ask yourself these questions and consider asking patients how they feel about your office. If you’re not communicating what you’d like to with your patients, there are definitely things you could tweak in order to be more effective on that front.

There is a well-known theory in the business-marketing world regarding how information is communicated in a business context. Let’s say you have a certain concept you want to communicate to someone. You communicate it to them. They hear a certain concept and act upon it. Those are the three main parts of the communication of a message. The interesting thing is that the message that you intended to communicate is not always the same message that is received. How closely these two align is determined by the medium and mode of communication that you use. Information can be communicated in a variety of ways within the office. Let me review some of the more common ones briefly.

In person

Offices are fast-paced environments and, frankly, written communication is slow. One of the most common forms of communication in the office environment is oral communication. Speaking with your reception staff, hygienist, or assistant is usually the fastest way to get information across. However, there is one problem with relying on oral communication alone: it’s notoriously unreliable. People mumble, mishear things, tune out, don’t write things down, and forget. Oral communication can thus lead to misunderstandings more so than any other form of communication. Another concern is that oral communication isn’t recorded. Unless someone writes down what is said, there is no record of it. This can play havoc in internal work relationships and can lead to an ineffective process in some cases. Of course, there are times when oral communication works better than anything else (for example, in the operatory), but there are a number of cases in which oral communication should be converted to something more permanent or at least written down. An example would be asking your reception staff to refer a patient to a specialist. If the request is made orally, staff may forget, the doctor may think that he’s made the request when he hasn’t, and the request could fall through the cracks of the endless stream of office paperwork. An alternative may be to use e-mail or have a written note taken on the spot. This is just one example of how communication in your office could be made more efficient. It also leads us to the next type of office communication.

Written communication

Written communication can take on many different forms. Paper notes, e-mails, faxes, various feedback and consent forms, and even Post-it notes are all examples of written communication that you may see in your office space. Unlike oral communication, written communication is more permanent and provides a record of what was communicated throughout the office, making it a desirable communication form. The only problem with it is that it’s slow and can easily be misinterpreted. Messy handwriting, short-forms, and absence of tone and body language can all lead to a written note being misinterpreted. However, this happens far less often than with oral communication because there is a paper trail. People can ask for clarification, check things that happened previously, and gain a better sense of what the note is about from supporting documents, other staff or other notes. This is the form of com-
Communication desired for most official communication. Staff records, patient records, to-do lists, etc. are typically all in a written format because they can then be tracked. So what do you want to keep in this type of format? You want to write down anything that you want to be able to refer back to at a later date. A not-so-typical form that you may want to consider using is writing down what occurred in meetings with office staff. This will allow you to look back at what was discussed, what items are outstanding, and what you should expect at an upcoming meeting. None of our memories is perfect and writing things down is a huge help in keeping records and helping your practice to run more smoothly.

Body language

The third type of communication (and possibly the most important) is what your body language/appearance and that of your staff says. While not explicit, what your body says can have a huge effect on how people perceive you, what people think of what you say, and even whether people believe what you’re saying to them. There isn’t much to be said about body language other than to be aware of how you’re coming across to others and whether there is anything that you’re doing that you could change that would make you appear more genuine, approachable, honest, or any other quality that you wish to demonstrate. In terms of appearance, do you seem approachable and trustworthy? Do you present yourself in a professional manner? Do other people think that you come across as someone to respect? These are all questions that you can ask yourself that deal with your body language and how you present yourself to other people. This matters in all of the interactions that you make—with your staff, clients and partners.

Collaborating

Now that you’re aware of the different types of methods of communicating, there is one more area in which they can be applied that can result in huge changes in your business: collaboration with others. When most people think of collaborating and working together, they think internally. Most will think about working together with their family or with their office staff. Very few think about how they can collaborate with others outside of their immediate circle. Yet, this type of collaboration can have a huge impact on your business. Throughout business history, companies have collaborated in order to come up with big ideas and profitable ventures. Think about Sirius Radio; that’s a company that knows collaboration. It only really took off after collaborating with car companies and having the system installed into cars before they left the sales floor. By working together, participating car companies got a new gadget to use to entice buyers to purchase their vehicles and Sirius Radio got access to a brand new market that proved to be extremely profitable.

Collaborating and communicating go hand in hand. If you’re lacking in how you communicate with others, your ability to collaborate with others will also be lacking. Collaboration is all about working together with others to generate returns that are greater than what either party could produce on its own. There are many collaboration opportunities for your practice. One of the most common examples is collaborating with other dentists using circular referral systems. This can result in huge returns for your practice, simply because you were able to collaborate with someone else. Think of other ways you could collaborate in your industry. How can you work with someone and mutually help each other in a way that neither could do on their own? Most of the biggest innovations in the world arose from some form of collaboration, so this is definitely something that you want to think about.

Conclusion

Always be aware of how you’re communicating with other people and always be looking for opportunities to collaborate. Simply being aware can do wonders, as you can change things that aren’t working, enhance things that are, and generally make your practice more efficient both internally and in the image that is presented to the outside world. Decide what you want to communicate as your brand and start doing it!

About the author

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