It’s all about relationships. No doubt you’ve heard that line many times. No matter what the profession — business, government, education, health care — relationships are critical. And, of course, in dentistry, they will build or break the practice.

The relationships you establish with your patients as you are addressing their oral health care needs and wants can last a lifetime.

Most practitioners have many patients who have been with them for 10, 15 or more than 20 years. Once they are in the practice, these patients get to know you and your team. They appreciate what you have to offer.

But what about the new patients that you need to sustain growth in your practice?

What about the individuals who are considering your practice, but haven’t made their first appointment yet and have no established relationship? They are looking at their dental options from a consumer’s point of view. Like it or not, they are analyzing, evaluating and judging your practice against others and basing that judgment on criteria you may not feel is fair.

As most of us in the business of providing a service know, consumers have very high expectations. If you had to step back and take a good hard look at your practice from the consumer’s point of view what would you discover?

Facing the facts

Conduct a “consumer analysis” of your practice and compare it to two other practices that you are competing with for patients. Develop a series of criteria and score your practice, or ask a friend or relative to score your practice, against the others.

Use a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Then step back and honestly consider how you stack up in the consumers’ minds, starting with convenience.

How conveniently located is your practice compared to your competitors? Is parking a problem? Is your practice difficult to find?

Are there stairs patients have to climb? Do you offer convenient appointment times to accommodate busy schedules?

Can new patients get an appointment within two weeks or is the business staff telling them they’ll have to wait months? New patients will not wait two, four or six months for an appointment.

Don’t make room for them in your schedule promptly, you must not want them in your practice.

What kind of a first impression does your building make? Will prospective patients who are driving by say, “That looks like a nice office.” Or will they say, “I wouldn’t want my car parked in that lot.”

Don’t trip over the telephone.

If a prospective patient calls your office, what impression does your practice make? Is the person answering the phone helpful or does the caller feel like she or he is just another interruption?

Does the business employee make the scheduling process easy and welcoming for the prospective patient? Or are the first few words, “Do you have insurance?” Does he or she often say, “No, we can’t do that.”

Is everyone who answers the phone prepared to answer key questions that prospective patients are likely to ask? Does the person answering the phone have a welcoming or annoyed tone to his or her voice?

Never forget that the person answering the phone in your office represents the entire team. In the first few seconds of a telephone contact, the caller is making judgments about the quality of your care and the helpfulness of your staff. It may not be fair, but it’s reality.

If you have even a glimmer of doubt about the impression your practice makes with callers, explore mystery patient services, which are now widely available to dental practices.

In addition, above all else, train your front line. Don’t assume that they know how to handle these essential practice-building skills. Find out!

Many business staff are very well intentioned and think they are handling prospective patient calls perfectly fine. They have no idea that in just a few short sentences they are driving patient after patient away, and that they need to learn the right way to handle these calls.

Follow-through or falling through the cracks?

How well would your team score on follow-through?

If a consumer calls and asks for information on a specific procedure such as implants or veneers, as well as information on the dentist or the office in general, do you have materials to send via post?

How long will it take the busy front-desk staff to get the information in the mail?

Better yet, do you have a Web site prospective patients can visit to learn more about the dentist, team and the practice as a whole?

Today, having a Web site is just as important as having a telephone.

Dental teams routinely underestimate the value of prospective patient/consumer inquiries. If yours is among them, it’s costing you a fortune.

Pay attention to the seemingly insignificant details. They have a huge impact on whether the consumer/potential patient makes an appointment with you or the dentist down the street. And, while you’re at it, take a look at those significant issues as well.

Factor No. 1: service

Take time to closely evaluate the five most critical consumer factors, namely: service, reliability, stability, expertise and price.

Service is listed first because consumers expect excellent service, and it is one of the most essential, but often overlooked, factors that will instantly set your practice apart from others.

Excellent service begins with the first phone call and continues with every interaction thereafter.

Something as simple as welcoming all patients — new and existing — to the practice by name when they walk in the door conveys a sense of appreciation and good service.

Looking patients in the eye when you speak to them and when they speak to you tells them you are genuinely interested in what they have to say and you are sincere in what you have to tell them.

Keeping your cool — even though it may be one of those “full-moon days” — and treating each individual as though he or she is the only patient you have to take care of at that very moment, puts the patient at ease.

This is because he or she feels the practice has things well under control and takes his or her best interests to heart.

Knowing the answers to common questions and providing thorough and complete information tells patients you have your act together and are well trained/pre-
pared. Similarly, getting back to patients when you say you will with the answer to a question indicates that you value their interest in your practice.

Factor No. 2: reliability
Patients expect the office to run reasonably on time. If the dentist or hygienist is behind schedule, telephone patients so they can make changes in their plans or reschedule if necessary.

If you can’t reach patients and they have to wait for more than 20 minutes, give them a letter signed by the dentist that:

• apologizes for the inconvenience,
• thanks them for their understanding,
• emphasizes that the practice makes every effort to remain on schedule,
• includes a $5 gift card to Starbucks (or something similar) in the envelope.

Patients may still be frustrated about the delay, but they will appreciate that the practice acknowledged the inconvenience.

Factor No. 3: stability
A solid team is the mark of a strong practice.

If Ann is at the front desk when the prospective patient calls, but has been replaced by Nicole when the patient comes in for the first appointment, who is later replaced by Joe when the patient returns for treatment ...

Well, you can bet that this new patient is going to develop concerns about the stability of your practice. If your make-up of your team seemingly changes as often as the seasons, patients begin to wonder about things; in particular, the quality of your care and the competency of your staff. Often, such concerns are for good reason.

If yours is a revolving door practice, it’s a strong indicator of some serious shortfalls in your personnel systems, including hiring, training and employee evaluations, just to name a few.

Factor No. 4: expertise
Brag about each other. You simply cannot overemphasize the expertise of the dentist and the team.

Take every opportunity to convey the message of excellence and quality.

If a patient asks a team member if the dentist is good at a particular procedure, answer with an emphatic, “Yes, she (he) is the best.”

The new patient packet and the practice Web site should give information about the entire team’s training and experience, particularly the dentist’s.

 Routinely inform patients about continuing education classes staff have participated in.

This is as simple as placing an 8 x 10 frame at the reception counter that highlights the staff member’s accomplishment.

For example, “Please join us in congratulating Dr. Jones for her recent certification from the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry.”

Factor No. 5: price
Make it easy for patients to accept treatment and pay for that treatment. Provide clear financing options that are both practice friendly and patient friendly.

Partner with a patient financing company, such as CareCredit. These types of firms provide excellent financing options that benefit both the practice and patient.

Conclusion
Make the most of what you have to offer today’s consumers and you will be far more likely to enjoy them as your patients for many years to come.

About the author
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