the patients, answer questions, and continuously promote what each member of the team has to offer patients. All of which elevate the professionalism of the entire practice.

Expectation marketing

After education, focus on expectation. The best internal marketing consistently delivers on the expectations of the patient. The average patient isn’t looking for foot massages or Champaign cocktails from their dentist. Most patients have a few basic expectations they want you and your team to deliver on the first time they visit your practice and each appointment thereafter, including the following four:

Timeliness. Patients expect the office to run reasonably on time. If the doctor or hygienist is behind schedule, telephone patients so they can make changes in their plans or reschedule if necessary. If you can’t reach the patient and they have to wait for more than 20 minutes, give them a letter signed by the doctor that apologizes for the inconvenience, thanks them for their understanding, emphasizes that the practice makes every effort to remain on schedule; however, occasionally special circumstances arise that affect the schedule, and include a $5 gift card to a Starbucks or a similar gift in the envelope. The patient may still be frustrated about the delay, but they will appreciate that the practice acknowledged the inconvenience.

Stability. Patients expect a doctor and team they can count on. If yours is a revolving door practice and each time the patient comes in for an appointment there’s someone new in the office, whether it’s the front desk staff, the hygienist, you assistant, the patient will feel this is a practice struggling with stability.

Information. They expect to be able to ask questions and receive clear answers. As I noted earlier, prepare your team. In addition, develop a list of frequently asked questions and their answers and keep them handy throughout the office.

Credibility. Patients expect you to deliver what you promise. If your razzle-dazzle ad campaign claims your practice is “state-of-the-art” because you have that fabulous new digital X-ray system, but the rest of your practice smacks of vintage 1980s, the patient will feel misled. If your practice claims to be modern, the patients should be able to see it from the moment they walk in the door to the moment they drive away.

First impression or last

Carefully consider your practice’s first impressions. Examine the new patient experience in its entirety. Review how new patient calls are handled. What may be standard operating procedure in a practice could come across as insulting to a prospective patient. For example, the new patient who calls to schedule an appointment and is greeted with the question, “Do you have insurance? No? Let me tell you our financial policy” immediately feels unwelcome and defensive. Educate them first on the excellence of the doctor and team. Get into the rules and regulations later.

While some external marketing is a helpful supplement, money cannot buy an advertising campaign that can compete with each patient’s actual experience with you and your team.

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