Want long-term patients? Address the obvious ...

By Sally McKenzie, CEO McKenzie Management

While many dentists tend to be overly concerned about the number of new patients coming into the practice each month, patient retention is where practice profitability is best achieved. The ability to retain patients makes a big difference in the patients’ average value.

It’s been shown that if patient retention is at 50 percent, the average value is $1,200 per patient. If you retain 75 percent of patients, the average value jumps to $2,500. In other words, patient value more than doubles.

Two things in particular are essential to retaining long-term loyal patients: First, address the common dislikes and frustrations. Second, build positive personal relationships. Chatting with the patient for five minutes or less every six months is not building a relationship. It requires a bit more consideration and effort than that, but will pay huge dividends in the longrun.

Start with your new patients by establishing a system in your office in which every new patient is sent a handwritten personal thank you note from the dentist, no exceptions. Keep it simple and straightforward, but also personal, for example.

Dear [Patient Name],

It was a pleasure meeting you at your new patient appointment on Wednesday. Thank you for choosing our practice. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at any time. And best of luck to your daughter in her upcoming soccer season!

Sincerely,
Dr. GoodDoc

Better yet, give new patients a brief call a couple of days before their appointment to introduce yourself. I guarantee the patient will be utterly stunned and thoroughly impressed. The key is personalization. A personal phone call and a handwritten, personalized note carries far more weight and value to the recipient.

While I’m on the topic of thanking patients, don’t overlook your referring patients. They have paid you and your team the highest compliment. Sending flowers or other “showy” gift to the workplace is one of the best ways to generate a “buzz” about your practice. The fact is that anytime someone receives flowers, everyone wants to know what the occasion is and whom they are from. In addition, if everyone is talking about your practice, it’s likely to generate even more referrals.

Address the realities of fear and pain

Next, minimize those aspects of the dental visit that patients dislike the most, starting with injections. There are products on the market today that enable you to give injections that are truly painless. This is particularly important when giving a shot in highly sensitive areas, such as the palate or upper incisors. These are experiences that patients remember for better or worse. Moreover, don’t overlook topical anesthetics for dental hygiene visits to minimize discomfort as much as possible.

Consider fearful patients. Many dentists would rather avoid them as much as such patients want to avoid the dentist. Certainly, anxious patients are a common source of stress for dentists who receive very little training in managing and caring for them. One of the most critical steps a dentist can take in handling anxious or phobic patients is to listen to them.

The fears of the patient will be as individualized and unique as the patients themselves. Taking extra care and time to build a relationship with the patients first and address their dental needs second is vital. It’s a process of gaining and keeping the patients’ trust.

Give patients the opportunity to talk about their fears. Ask them if they have had any negative experiences in the past, if they have concerns about dental treatment, about injections, anesthesia, drilling, etc.
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Shade matching for indirect restorations using a remote laboratory

By Barry F. McArdle, DMD

Ideally, shade matching for indirect restorations would occur with a laboratory technician in the dental operatory performing this function directly. Yet, in reality, according to the most recent statistics on the subject published by the American Dental Association in July of 2009, less than 5 percent of all dental offices in the United States have an in-house dental laboratory. The reality dictates that the vast majority of the more than 40 million indirect restorations placed each year in this country are fabricated at remote dental laboratories and because an exceedingly high percentage of those are tooth colored, shade matching becomes a critical challenge for the dentist in these situations.

There are four key areas involved with accurately accomplishing a shade match for an indirect restoration: the quality of the clinical preparation, the restorative material used, the skills of the lab technician involved, and the quality of the clinical records provided to that technician. This article will explore the last consideration as it is very often the most demanding of the four and to my mind the least well elucidated.

The answers to those questions can be every bit as important as the routine health history questions posed. Not only will the patients’ stress levels go down, so too will the dentist’s. Many anxious or phobic patients feel extremely comfortable in the dental chair and this can be particularly traumatic. Helping them to feel that they have some control is critical. The most common approach is to establish a signaling system in which the dentist will stop working if patients raise a hand for any reason—and have a time-out for procedures.

Subtle messages have a big impact

Watch your timing. Neither the patient nor the dental team appreciates it when staff runs behind schedule. It’s essential that the scheduling coordinator fully understand how much time is required for procedures.

Additionally, consider checking hygiene patients when it is convenient for you, the dentist, not at the end of the hygiene appointment. This requires a little adjustment at first, but can significantly improve efficiency.

In addition, put pay attention to the subtle messages that the employees send to patients, specifically, their smiles. If your assistant can smile with confidence and tell the patient that Dr. GoodDoc is her dentist and he is absolutely the best, this has a huge positive impact chairside in selling treatment. Moreover, it will make the team member feel good about working for your practice.

Most importantly, make it easy for your patients to pursue treatment. They like you. They like your team. They trust your recommendations, but they are afraid of the price tag. Provide financial options. Offer 10 percent off if they pay with cash or check. Consider 5 percent off if they use credit card and pay at the time of service.

Provide outside financing options as well. The 12-months interest-free financing offered by CareCredit is my personal favorite. All you have to say to the patient is, “How does 12-months interest-free financing sound to you?” and he/she is usually thrilled to pursue your recommended care.

Finally, don’t disappear for six months. Keep your name in front of your patients. Send birthday cards, articles, magnets, electronic newsletters, recipes, etc.

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Fig. 1: Most natural tooth hues range in the visible spectrum of light from wavelengths through the mid 570s to about the mid 580s. (Photos/Provided by Dr. Barry F. McArdle)

Fig. 2: Chroma measures the saturation of hue.

About the author

Sally McKenzie is a nationally known lecturer and author. She is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides highly successful and proven management services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Management offers a full line of educational and management products, which are available on its website, www.mckenzie_mgmt.com. In addition, the company offers a vast array of business operations programs and team training.

McKenzie is the editor of the e-Management newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter sent complimentary to practices nationwide. To subscribe, visit www.mckenzie_mgmt.com and www.thedentistsnetwork.net. She is also the Publisher of the New Dentist’s magazine, www.thedentistnewdentist.net. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll-free at (877) 777-6151 or at sallymck@mckenzie_mgmt.com.