Making first contact
From the very first call that a patient makes to your practice, the team at reception should be word perfect in their greeting and continue to engage in open questioning, to glean information about the person’s needs and requirements. This will allow the correct appointment slot to be booked, and will also ensure that the customer feels they are already receiving first-class treatment. All calls should be logged onto a basic form which should not only include the patient’s name, but also where they heard about the practice, who answered their call and whether or not they went ahead and booked an appointment.

By knowing whether the person in need of an appointment, you can begin to understand if your team enjoys a high success rate of converting new callers into booked appointments. Ideally you should be looking to achieve at least an 80 per cent conversion rate.

You will also be able to see which members of the team require additional training and support. Should a team member’s conversion rates differ greatly from other receptionists, you will be able to focus on improving their skills.

By knowing how patients heard about your practice, you will also be able to refine your marketing strategies and measure your return on investment. This will ensure that money is not spent in areas that generate little or no pertinent contact for the practice.

If you follow this tracking all the way through the patient’s treatment you will be able to establish exactly what your marketing or advertising investment brought to the business in terms of revenue.

Before the first visit
If you stock patient welcome packs, the reception team should send one out whenever a patient books an appointment. A medical questionnaire and a smile analysis should be included.

‘From the very first call that a patient makes to your practice, the team at reception should be word perfect in their greeting’

This allows the patient to complete the forms at home and bring them along to their initial appointment, having had ample time to think deeply about the smile analysis. If patients complete the smile analysis in the waiting room, they might rush their answers and not let you know about certain options they may be interested in, such as tooth whitening. They may also not be clear about the particular concerns they might have pertaining to treatment options.

By using a questionnaire of this type, you will be able to engage your patient in a discussion that revolves around achieving their desired outcomes, rather than making assumptions about their requirements. For instance, assuming that they do not have an interest in a particular procedure because they haven’t mentioned it, can be an obstacle to greater uptake of higher value treatment plans.

At the first visit
Once the patient arrives at the practice, the reception team should make the patient feel welcome and confident.

Communication skills and positive body language are vitally important when a patient visits the practice for the first time, and your team members will have to take individual responsibility for creating that first impression.

At this time the front desk staff should make sure the patient’s completed documents, and take them through to the relevant dentist so that any areas raised on the smile questionnaire can be reviewed prior to the patient being brought to the surgery. This ensures that the patient’s requirements are met, and also means that the dentist will have patient knowledge of the patient’s concerns and needs, which shows that the practice is efficiently run and customer-focused.

Cancellations and FTAs
Every month there is a certain amount of time wasted in practice by patients either failing to attend appointments or cancelling at short notice. Both of these can have a huge impact on the revenue of a practice when the cost is added up.

Your reception team can make a real difference in both these areas by using the correct verbal techniques when the patient makes an appointment. Letting the patient know in the right way that a certain amount of notice is required should cancellation be necessary, and that FTAs will incur a charge, goes a long way to reducing missed appointments.

Should a patient try and cancel an appointment at short notice then use the effective communication techniques can, in many cases, result in that patient in fact attending for treatment, thereby averting a gap in the diary and consequently a loss of income. Likewise, a patient that fails an appointment may be unlikely to do so again if the correct verbal skills are used when calling them about their non-attendance. Team members should remember to always be clear, concise and polite. If they know their role, then they will never fall short if they focus on these key points.