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For those principals looking to take their practice to another level, a well-run reception desk is a must. In today’s competitive world, patients have higher expectations than ever before, and those who have had experience at a practice will never return. Excellent communication skills and administration skills are necessary to deliver the necessary five-star standard of customer service.

Ideally, you should begin by reviewing the whole patient journey through your practice, from the first contact with a potential customer through to the final visit on a course of treatment. This will provide you with an overview that will enable you to make the necessary changes to reflect how you would like things to happen in the future, and create a standard of service.

Many times we have heard dental surgeons tell us that their teams are exceptionally good on the phone with patients, yet there are no systems to support or disprove these claims. In fact, most surgeons have never called their own practice to experience first-hand how their practice is portrayed to potential new customers. They have never returned.

By knowing whether the person meets 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 enable you to generate little or no patient downtime effectively.

Your reception team are not only the face of your business, representing you to the outside world, but they also provide you with key information that will assist you in making important business decisions in order to move the practice forward.

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 comply with the code of practice, questioning, to glean information about the person’s needs and requirements. This will allow the correct appointment slot to be booked, and will ensure that the patient feels they are already receiving first-class treatment. All calls should be logged onto a basic form which should not include only 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.

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This allows the patient to complete their knowledge of the 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 know the patient’s concerns and needs, which shows that the practice is efficiently run and customer-focused.

By using a questionnaire of this type, you will be able to ensure 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 part of the practice 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 ensure that the patient feels 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 ensure that the patient’s 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 not attending 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 is 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 fail short if they focus on these key points.

When they are all properly trained in using their verbal skills and familiar with predetermined telephone scripts, the reception team will ensure that the vast majority of appointment meetings are met without causing offence to your patients.

Appointment tracking and recall bookings

Any patient that requires a further appointment but doesn’t make it at the time of their first visit should be tracked and followed up. This will ensure that no incomplete treatments are left without finding out why a patient has not gone ahead with a booked session.

A robust recall policy is imperative, and the reception team should ensure that it is carried out routinely, and that all patients are followed up. Many practices lose hundreds of patients each year simply because their recall systems are not followed.

With a well-trained, fully supported, and appreciated reception team in place, your practice will deliver first class customer service all day, every day. This not only ensures that your patients recommend your practice, but also enables you to move the practice forward, driving revenue and controlling downtime effectively.

Valuations:
purchase, sale, buying in, retirement

Purchases: practices available countrywide

Sales: totally confidential service for vendors

Practice loans arranged for any purpose from 0.95% above base rate.

About the author

Ian Stead

After graduating from Imperial College London, in 1980, with a degree in Zoology, Ian Stead joined Rentokill PLC Pest Control Division under a graduate recruitment scheme and soon progressed to sales manager at the company’s London branch. In 1993, Ian established an independent pest control company in London, which was sold in 2004. As the son of a dentist, Ian possessed some empathy with dentists and dentistry. It was with this understanding and his excellent knowledge of running a successful business that Ian joined Frank Taylor & Associates in April 2006 as managing director.

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Practice Management

Five-star first impressions

Ian Stead offers some tips on running an effective and efficient reception desk

The looking responsible, valuing and skills matrix to the central profession.

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