Setting the standards

I am sitting in the lounge of a hotel in South Africa writing this article. It is 6:15am, the time when my mind is clear and there are no disturbances. Then the hotel manager walks in. At 6:15am. He comes up to me and greets me by name (there are 200 people staying at the hotel). He asks what I am doing awake so early, and after a brief explanation, I ask the same of him. He replies: ‘If things don’t start right they don’t go right. My job is to see they start right – and then when my deputy arrives at 8am, I hand over and go out for a round of golf.’ The boss sets the standards, and everyone else delivers – this is why I come back here every year.

Setting aside for the moment the current recession, think of your high-street bank and consider what happens when you go at lunchtime to deposit your weekly takings. Think of the 10 to 20 minutes you stand in line, watching and listening as a cashier sits counting a mountain of coins from someone else’s deposit or phoning head office to deal with a customer’s query or, more likely, complaint. Then think of your feelings when just a few short months ago you picked up your Sunday newspaper and read that the bank had made billions of pounds in profit that quarter. Then think about the notion of service.

‘Keeping patients happy while waiting in your waiting room.’ Suggestions ranged from providing daily newspapers and current magazines to playpens for kids to serving coffee and doughnuts. Then I put my hand up and asked: ‘Wouldn’t it be better not to keep them waiting at all?’ Two hundred pairs of eyes burned me for even considering such a ridiculous concept. The question went unanswered. It still does. Yet there is an answer, and the answer is: ‘Think beyond the excellence of what you do.’

‘There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company, from the chairman down, simply by spending his money somewhere else.’

Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart

Patient service

Dentistry has never been noted as a truly service-oriented profession. It, like its medical counterpart, took its lead from central Government. Until a few years ago the notion of patient service wasn’t even a twin- kle in the eye of a medical professional. Then it was born but was rooted in the idea that if you delivered quality in what you did (excellent diagnosis, excellent treatment) you were delivering patient service. Today, however, the bouncing ball has moved on, and service encompasses not just excellence in what you do but aftercare. It includes dealing with complaints, or better still, pre-empting them. In short, it is the whole story of keeping your patients/customers satisfied. It is now about supreme customer service.

Supreme customer service is essential in attaining market supremacy over your colleag ues, and is achieved by re-defining the role of service within your practice using cutting-edge service thinking. It is about attracting, courting and marrying the customer to your business, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship, and most important, keeping the customer and avoiding a divorce which is costly in terms of lost revenue and goodwill. The desired outcome is to have as many patients/customers as you can manage comfortably who will become loyal, lifelong advocates of your practice and your personal excellence.

My next article will deal with how this can be achieved.