Delivering patient experience

If you have focused your team on delivering the best possible experience to patients, your business is sure to flourish, says Lesley Bailey

We know that word-of-mouth referrals will always be your strongest marketing tool and that patients will only recommend your services to others if they have enjoyed a positive experience at your practice. So my next question to my clients is: ‘What score would you give yourself for your customer care when one is low and 10 is high?’

I allow a few moments, as they ponder the answer to this question before reminding them that it is only their patients who can provide the answer and that to try and judge it from their own perspective is actually a waste of time.

So before I encourage my clients to invest any money in marketing their practice, we assess the level of service being delivered to ensure it is consistently excellent. In this way we can ensure money invested in marketing provides the best possible return and that the business grows organically through increased Word of Mouth referrals.

Step one: benchmarking

Therefore, the first step to take before beginning any marketing project is to benchmark the current level of patient care. There are a variety of ways to do this. Try assessing the first impression new callers have when they contact your practice or ask your patients informally to comment upon your service and care and establish whether there is any aspect of their experience that could be improved upon. Or you can undertake more structured patient satisfaction surveys – I recommend all these methods are used to assess your service levels. Limitations in practice resources can make it almost impossible to find the time to carry out mystery caller and patient surveys, but I always urge my clients to find the means to carry out this vital benchmarking exercise. The results can often be surprising and provide important business intelligence to help you develop your patients’ experience.

Step two: develop your patient experience

You will need to act upon any areas as which patients have identified for improvement and work with your team to create a consistently excellent experience for each and every patient when they call or visit your practice. Don’t forget, your patients will not judge you necessarily upon the quality of the dentistry you provide for them – in fact they will take that as a given. They will also judge you on your professionalism, efficiency, warmth and many of the small human gestures that develop rapport and illustrate the value you place upon them. The surroundings, facilities, printed material and in fact anything which patients see and hear or feel will create an impact.

A neutral experience

Ask yourself a question. When do you begin to judge the quality of the meal you will eat in a restaurant you have not dined at before? If you think about it, it is before you see, smell or taste your food. If you then go to a new restaurant and you are given a menu, may you begin to form an impression of what you will get, your patients will not judge you necessarily upon the quality of the clinical governance package they receive when they visit your practice. They may, however, judge you on your professionalism, efficiency, warmth and many of the small human gestures that develop rapport and illustrate the value you place upon them.

The areas the DBG assesses are:

• Your premises including access, facilities, security, fire precautions, third parties and business continuity plans.
• Information governance including Freedom of Information Act, manual and computerised records, Data Protection and security.
• Training, documentation and certificates.
• Radiography including IRR99 and IR(ME)R2000 compliance.
• Cross infection and decontamination including HTM 01-05 compliance and surgery audits.
• Medical emergencies including resuscitation, drugs, equipment and protocols.
• Training, documentation and certificates.
• Waste disposal and documentation and storage.
• Practice policies and written procedures.
• Clinical audit and patient outcomes including quality measures.

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lasting opinions about the experiences we have.

Step three: gather management information

Let us assume you have benchmarked your current levels of patient satisfaction and that you have reviewed and refined the experience you will provide systematically to every patient who calls or visits the practice.

The next step is to ensure you have a system in place to record each enquiry and the referral source for each new business opportunity.

There is little point in investing in a variety of marketing opportunities if you do not record the response you receive from each activity. Your front of house team must ensure they record each new enquiry, the reason for their call, secure a contact point if possible and find out how the enquirer heard about the practice.

You can analyse this information to establish the ratio between enquiries and consultations and assess the effectiveness of the front of house team in communicating effectively with new patients and motivating them to make an appointment.

This system may be developed further by tracking the patient as they attend, ensuring they have been referred to the dental hygienist and if they are proceeding with their prescribed treatment. More than 25 per cent of a dentist’s revenue can be lost because patients do not proceed with treatment. Few practices have the skill or resource to address this aspect of their business and don’t invest in finding out why patients don’t go ahead with their dental treatment.

Step four: measure your return on investment

Few practices work out the return on investment in marketing. Here is a simple method to establish whether the practice has made money on a marketing activity.

For this example we will assume a gross profit margin of 65 per cent - you must measure returns on profit and not on gross revenue.

If you invest £2,000 on a large glossy full-page advert, you will need to generate £3,077 worth of income to break even. £3,077 income x 65 per cent gross profit = £2,000.05 gross profit or sufficient profit to cover the advert cost.

Step five: set a budget and develop a marketing plan

If you do not already allocate a marketing budget, consider the sum of money you are prepared to invest in the development of your business. This amount will depend upon the current status of your business, but in a steady state practice, I usually recommend around two per cent of gross income.

Carry out an analysis on your local marketplace, including your competition and how you compare. Decide who your target market is as a cover all approach rarely works.

Many practice teams forget that their most important target market is their existing patients – these individuals have already bought into your products and services so the first part of your plan should include marketing internally to existing patients.

The next area to focus on in your sphere of influence is other interested parties and your plan should cover marketing which will reach out to your target market. This could include a variety of marketing activities including; events, display advertising, window posters, advertising boards etc.

Finally your plan should include some activity to ‘the rest of the world’, i.e direct mailing, radio advertising or PR.

A small fortune

One of the most valuable lessons I have learnt is that sometimes the most effective marketing is the least expensive.

Certainly, if you have focussed your team on delivering the best possible experience to patients, your business will grow organically. The investment you do make in marketing will pay dividends as new patients joining your practice through marketing will become great advocates of your business.

About the author

Lesley Bailey is a partner in Yes!, a business that offers a range of patient communication services to dental and other businesses. For more information about how Yes! can help you maximise your revenue and profit through effective communication with patients visit www.yes-suits.co.uk or call 08456 45 50 12 or email info@yes-suits.co.uk to find out more.

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