Investing in various marketing strategies is crucial to communicate a commitment to excellence, in order to reach prospective patients and reinforce relationships with current clients. However, one of the key reasons patients choose your practice is your direct communication — whether face-to-face, over the telephone or by email.

These days, many patients are more tentative in their spending; this is not to say that they will not invest in treatment, but they need to know that they are receiving a quality service that they value. In the midst of a credit crunch, nobody likes to entertain the notion that money is being spent unnecessarily. So how do you ensure that patients pick up on your professionalism and dedication?

Positive communication is not just about listening to patients and ascertaining their specific needs; nor is it just about being able to explain clearly and succinctly about what options they have, and what each procedure entails.

**Answering the phone**

A crucial and often overlooked aspect of effective communication is ‘word choice’ and ‘tone’. This starts with answering the phone at reception to potential or existing patients. For instance, answering the phone with a “Hello, the dental practice” presents a different picture to the caller than a sunny “Good morning, the dental practice, this is Simon speaking, how can I help you today?”

Certain words are loaded with negativity. When a patient calls to make an appointment on a particular day, but there are no convenient slots available, it is better to say that this is your “most popular day” rather than your “busiest”. It creates an image of patients choosing your practice because of the quality of your service.

Then there are the labels so many practices use. Why indicate that patients are likely to experience a delay before their appointment by calling the area the “waiting room”? Have refreshments, comfortable chairs, up-to-date magazines and stylish décor and call it a “client lounge”. If there is a delay, do not say: “Hope-fully you will not be waiting long”, go that extra mile by saying: “Mr Dentist is just going to be a few minutes longer while he cares for another patient, could I offer you a drink?”

**Service with a smile**

Patients want to be greeted with a smile (even on the phone!) and cared for from the moment they first contact the team until after their first appointment and your follow-up to that appointment.

Choosing your words and your tone and being “relentlessly positive” is infectious: it makes your patients (and you!) feel better and it’s very attractive. Patients remember how you made them feel. If you made them feel good when they rang up to enquire, then they will choose to make their first appointment with you. If you then follow this up by making them feel good throughout their experience within the practice and afterwards, then they are very likely to continue to come back to you. The simplest (and most cost-effective) marketing strategy there is! 

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*About the author*

Dr Simon Hocken, founding partner of Breathe Business, a unique leading coaching and consultancy company which specialises in working with dental principals and their teams in order to develop and grow their practices. For more information, contact Dr Simon Hocken and the Breathe team by calling 0845 299 7209 or emailing info@nowbreathe.co.uk

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