Touting your wares

It’s in your interest to advertise the cosmetic procedures you offer at your practice, says Tracy Stuart

It is perhaps a testament to the professionalism of UK dental practitioners that they balk at opportunities to 'sell' cosmetic treatments to patients who might benefit from them. In truth, it is a mixture of a concern to preserve the image of the profession and a lack of confidence when it comes to marketing their services.

These days, everyone in the public eye has a nice smile. Usually this is the result of very expensive dental work that is out of the reach of most people. However, advances in technique and technology have enabled dentists to offer cosmetic treatments at an affordable cost, to meet the rising demand for improved aesthetics.

"Traditionally, dentists were found in the same club as undertakers and the taxman – people you didn’t ever want to see. The caricature of the visit to the dentist, of dental pain being relieved by a cathartic dose of surgical pain, no longer rings true. Now, many people visit the dentist to improve their quality of life by helping them achieve a healthy, straight smile. Sometimes, even a straightforward cosmetic procedure can make the world of difference to a patient."

In order to meet this need, dentists are investing a great deal of time and money in developing the skills and installing the equipment to provide a range of restorative and cosmetic dental treatments. The most forward thinking advertise these new treatments on their websites and literature. However, there is more that can be done.

Dentists, who have invested in a multidisciplinary approach and extended their treatment list to cater for the many needs of the patient base, may well treat patients who could benefit greatly from a particular procedure. The trick is, how to broach the subject with the patient without seeming pushy. There is a certain resistance against the blurring of boundaries between ‘healthcare’ and ‘sales and marketing’, but the competitive modern dental industry, few dentists can afford to ignore the fact that maximising opportunities increases profits.

Patients do not always know what treatments are being offered, and there are many reasons why it’s useful to advertise them. For example, if you don’t, your patients might resort to travelling abroad for treatment – where they are especially vulnerable and may not be able to explain to the dentist exactly what they want, because they don’t speak the language.

Learning to communicate

Dentists do not want to be pushy, and many are concerned that any efforts to introduce a patient to further treatment options may be misconstrued as 'the hard sell', which is not suitable in dentistry. So, what can they do to confidently suggest other items on the treatment list to patients who might benefit from them? It is all a question of developing the skills in effective communication.

Solutions are available that include a patient care co-ordinator programme that helps the dentist and the dental team achieve a gold standard in customer service. Improved lines of communication do not just run between staff and patients, making patients more relaxed and informed, and ensuring that dentists know exactly what they want; the lines of communication also run between staff members, enhancing efficiency of the working systems and reducing stress.

The patient care co-ordinator programme has a training plan that comprehensively covers the patient’s journey through the practice in its entirety, from telephone conversations with the front desk or receptionist, and what should be covered in that first appointment.

The treatment plan contains useful advice to help staff communicate more effectively and with greater confidence. This is achieved by looking at greeting strategies, and phrases that are useful and ones that should be avoided. The role of body language is also examined. By mastering verbal skills and tone of voice, using methods including role-play to sharpen those skills and provide experience, and repeated practice using scripts, the dental team will be better equipped to deal with patient queries.

Of course, armed with these improved communication skills, the dentist will be able to introduce other items on the treatment list confidently and competently, without being pushy or aggressive, retaining a strong sense of professionalism.

"There is more that dental professionals can do besides implementing proven communication methods. A regular report on patient flow can provide crucial information that can be used to market particular treatments more effectively.

Improving efficiency

In the current competitive climate, with the credit crunch threatening everyone, it is strange that many dentists do not examine the statistics of their practice more often. How else will they know how to improve the efficiency of their business?"

For instance, how many dentists know how many patients contact the practice per month? How many of those decide to attend? How many still go on to accept treatment? Finally, how many come back in the future, and become loyal patients? It is impossible to reap the full rewards of training and marketing without knowing this information.

Would you like to know how that patient who just accepted an expensive cosmetic treatment found out about it, and why they chose you and not your main competitor? You can use this information to reach out to more patients, making the most of your skills, meeting their needs, and of course boosting sales!

Find out what your conversion rate of new inquiries is, and then look to improve it. If the rate is lower than 80 per cent, you might need to think about investing in training.

With first-rate communication, you can keep your patients informed, and by examining data about your patients, you will be able to market your treatment list more effectively, leading to greater success.

"About the author

Tracy Stuart

of Frank Taylor & Associates Consulting, with her experience of practice development, helps dentists achieve their full potential and make the most of their skills and resources. For more information, call Frank Taylor and Associates Consulting on 08456 125454, fax 01770 843276 or email team@80-associates.com

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