Customer service, and beyond

Building a good reputation for customer service and dentistry to retain existing and recruit new patients might be easy to say, but isn’t so easy to implement in practice. Dr Elaine Halley explains.

I’ve followed the development of the customer-service revolution in dentistry for many years. In the process, my own practice has been transformed as my vision and personal interests have developed – from a family general practice to a practice which emphasises advanced restorative and cosmetic dentistry, which relies on our reputation for excellent customer care (and of course good dentistry) to retain existing and recruit new patients. However, this is easy to say – not so easy to implement in practice.

A friend of mine who remains loyal to his National Health Service practice is facing a decision. His practice is going ‘private’ in the near future, and he expressed his feelings very strongly to me. ‘I know what you provide at your practice and the level of attention and service is unbelievable – but I don’t want to spend that much on my teeth.’ Fair enough. However, he continues: ‘If my dentist goes private, they’d better up their game. Do they expect me to pay more for the same when I don’t even get a hello or a how are you?’

Notice – not a comment on the dentistry. Is he going to be satisfied with ‘we’ll spend more time with you?’ I doubt it.

Upping your game

Of course, in modern dental practice, the clinical dentistry has to be the best you can deliver. Membership of organisations such as the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, or the Association of Dental Implantology, provide excellent educational and networking opportunities without the necessity to travel abroad. Nevertheless, any time away from the practice has a cost implication. An investment in postgraduate education is an investment which should be reflected in an increase in your fees. Meanwhile, your patients do have a choice about where they spend their hard earned money, and one of the factors they will use in differentiating between your practice and the competition is the level of service they receive. Where does your practice position itself with regards to customer care?

Extreme customer service

Dr Tom Orent from New England wrote a book called Extreme Customer Service – in other words, going over the edge in terms of what is expected. The book is full of illustrations from

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all businesses of going above and beyond, or absolutely not going anywhere. The delivery of the WOW experience is a sure way to generate word of mouth referrals. Another excellent book on this subject is Raving Fans by Ken Blanchard—a must read for all team members. The leading management thinkers of our time are saying this—it is no longer good enough to be good at what we do, we have to be world-class, to be continually improving our service to our customers, or our business will not survive.

Critical non-essentials

Paddi Lund, an Australian dentist, wrote a book called the Happiness Centred Practice. His philosophy was simple—many of us can spend more time at work than we do with our loved-ones, so why not make it a pleasant place to be, and work with patients who value and trust us? He does no external advertising, he doesn't even have a sign up at his door, just an apple to identify him to his ‘invitation only’ patients. His concept of the critical non-essentials is key. It is all the little things that we can do, none of which are essential, but all of which combined will make our patient’s experience with us outstanding. Little things such as, having name badges for all team members so that our patients know who they are speaking to, offering to take our patient’s coats, presentation of all our paperwork.....The list is endless. For Paddi, it includes a tea ceremony between him and a new patient, baking sugar-free muffins to give away as gifts.....you can find your own unique critical non-essentials—what is to identify and know them, and make them part of the norm.

Five-star service

Again, little things such as making sure patient’s are escorted from room to room, standing up and shaking hands when any team member meets a patient for the first time, having fresh flowers and comfortable seating.....Larry Rosenthal’s renowned practice in Manhattan is an example of concierge service. Many of his patients travel in to see him so he offers a complete service, including hotel and restaurant reservations. I’ve even seen practices in the States that will valet your car or have someone walk your dog while you are having treatment.

The Ritz-Carlton hotel chain is often quoted for its excellent service standards, and a useful team exercise can be to visit the nearest five-star hotel to your practice, and take notes! What is the first impression? How is the ambiance? Note the clutter or lack of it at reception? The floor covering, the music, the precise words used by the staff, their uniforms, for example.

Spa dentistry

The premise of spa dentistry as opposed to a beauty spa, is that most patients don’t like coming to the dentist. Therefore, how can we pamper them as much as possible using spa-like ambiance and amenities—so that they don’t feel like they are at a dentist, and will hopefully feel more relaxed and therefore more able to cope with treatment. Many studies have shown that pain threshold is increased dramatically by the use of relaxation techniques—sometimes even as simple as listening to music. In other words, utilizing pampering such as paraffin hand-wax or massage pads on the chairs, lets your patient know you care, and helps them relax and cope with or even enjoy their treatment!

Still not enough?

Now, I find, none of the above are enough. And that makes sense. I have believed for years, that a practice can have all the spa amenities, all the clinical expertise and enough paraffin hand wax and lip balm to grease an ocean liner, but if the SYSTEMS are not in place so that these courtesies are offered every single time without fail to your patient (oops.... I meant guest of course), you set yourself up for failure, and a more disgruntled patient than if you hadn’t tried in the first place. This can feel unfair in the reality of a busy dental practice, just trying to catch up after an almighty disaster leaves you running behind, but it is the reality.

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In one of this year’s top-selling business books, Setting The Table by Danny Myer, another concept is introduced – he calls it 'Enlightened Hospitality' and it is a lot to do with all of the above plus, the all important relationship building. And more than that – turning over rocks and connecting the dots – which really means listening and probing further into our customers wants, needs and expectations, and networking! All of which can equally apply to our world of dentistry.

When you are thinking about the ultimate in customer service – it doesn’t stop with the non-clinical. Critical non-essentials carry straight through into the clinical area also. Breaking down every step of the patient journey is a very useful tool in analysing your systems for care. For example, in the area of delivery of local anaesthetic, do you use the strongest available topical gel, do you warm the anaesthetic, do you utilise computerised delivery like The Wand?

All of the above depend on a nurturing environment and building trust with your patients. The more you raise the bar on your level of service, the higher you will be measured by your patients and the easier it is to disappoint them. Remember under promise and over deliver? Harry Beckwith in the excellent book ‘Selling the Invisible’ sums it up – it is easy to exceed a customer's expectations the first time, but much more difficult to keep on doing it time after time. The exceptional becomes the norm. Ever feel like the salesman who blows his targets only to find next year’s targets go up and up? At some point will the targets become impossible?

Do you measure up?

So – we have extreme service, five-star service, white-glove service, concierge service, guest mentality, dental spa, critical non-essentials, exceeding expectations, over promise and under deliver… are you exhausted yet? How are you measuring up?

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specific about the level of service that is acceptable. The old clichés still hold true – the road to providing excellent, profitable customer service should be considered a journey, and never a destination!
Team with talent

Jeremy Reuben insists that by casting a wider net to find your new team member, you are more likely to find several professionals who meet your requirements.

To meet the increasingly high expectations of patients, you need a team that is efficient, extremely skilled and motivated. You also need considerable expertise and experience to give yourself the edge over competitors. To make your business a positive example to others, and attract more patients, you need to be recruiting from the widest pool of talent available.

This is not always easy to do. Recruitment is a highly specialised area, and requires unique expertise. Even when you are drawing just from the local area, sifting through all those CVs and conducting all those interviews is a lengthy, involved process. You would also need to check multiple references for each candidate. Whatever way you look at it, that’s a lot of work – work you probably don’t have time for. Another consideration is that you might not find the person you are looking for in your local area.

Further a field

What if you were casting a wider net? Imagine if you were including candidates from every corner of the UK in pursuit of a team member of the very highest calibre. If you could reach out that far in your search, you would have better chance of finding that consummate professional – but how would you deal with all of those responses from potentially many hundreds of candidates?

It is possible of course to place an advert in the dental press, but this can take time to produce a response. Even then, you might not find the right professional to complete your team. In short, it costs a lot of money to advertise in the dental press, with no guarantee of success.

Lightening the load

By enlisting the support of an employment agency that specialises in finding permanent and locum professionals for the dental industry, you can make the task of recruitment a great deal easier, and by opting for an agency that has a ‘no placement, no fee’ approach, you are assured of a cost-effective service.

With skilled consultants handling the process, you are free to continue focusing to find your perfect match on treating patients and running the practice.

This means that the candidates on the agency database (numbering tens of thousands for the most renowned agencies) are from locations all over the UK, so with a simple phone call or email you will be able to reach all the relevant candidates in your region, and beyond. It is worth remembering that, where permanent positions are concerned, people will often consider relocation. It is also possible that arrangements can be made for the right candidate to relocate temporarily to fulfil a locum role.

It is a simple question of statistics: by casting a wider net to find your new team member, you are more likely to find several professionals who meet your requirements, giving you the luxury of choice. With a UK-wide employment agency handling the recruitment process, your practice can only benefit. So next time you have a vacancy, think about taking the easy route – and let the experts bring the talent to your door.

Jeremy Reuben

Jeremy Reuben is director of Browns Dental Employment Agency (BDEA) which trades as Browns Locumlink. He’s a qualified pharmacist and a member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society since 1983. For more information, contact Browns Locumlink on 020 8927 0972, email dental@brownslocumlink or visit www.brownslocumlink.com.

About the author

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