Creating a selling culture

Providing dentistry is all about selling your product, giving patients correct and honest information and providing them with options that help them find ways to best suit their financial circumstances. Lina Craven explains...

There is little resemblance between the healthcare industry today and the industry we worked in 10 years ago. Technology, industrial relations, economic circumstances, legislation, patient care and expectations have all influenced the dental sector and facilitated the changes we see within practices today. Practices continuing to offer the same services, in the same environment, with the same expectations of team contribution today, as they did in the 20th century, would cease to exist. Customer satisfaction is fundamental to business success and that’s why the best results are achieved by those practices that create a passion for continual improvement.

Continual improvement

Culture is the shared beliefs and values of a group of people, and in this case that group is your team. Creating any sort of culture within your practice requires the constant reinforcement of a specific message. In the case of continual improvement that message must be that it is OK for team members to regularly review the way things are done, to question why they are done that way, and to ask if there is a better way of doing it. Such an approach doesn’t encourage anarchy as some of you might believe; in fact it does quite the opposite. By giving team members responsibility for moulding the practice they develop a sense of ownership that is visible in every aspect of their performance. All the things you had been striving to achieve and implement through a hierarchical, perhaps more dictatorial approach, suddenly begin to happen.

A prime example of this phenomenon is selling. Often just expressing the word within a practice is like committing blasphemy. The notion that selling and professionalism can co-exist is not readily accepted within our industry along with the belief that patients do not welcome being sold to. I would like to dispel that assumption.

Selling is what patients want and demand

Modern dentistry requires a whole new approach. It isn’t just about looking and finding problems, it’s about asking the right questions, explaining the options, educating and supporting, and offering the most appropriate services—in any other language that is selling!

A survey of patients from practice across the UK indicated that only two per cent said they were interested in being informed. So the patient—the customer—wants to be educated, but their practices were not forthcoming with information, probably because they perceived it...
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**We might not feel comfortable talking money but it is expected and necessary.**

As selling. Not only does this represent a lost revenue opportunity for the practice, it also results in the patients’ disappointment and mismanagement of their expectations.

If you thought these patients belonged to your practice, wouldn’t you want to change your approach to satisfy their needs better? A culture for continual improvement would insist that you consider whether your approach is as good as it could be; it would demand that you find ways to make it better. It would naturally result in someone from your practice recommending dental products to his/her patients; them assessing the very positive response patients would elicit, and them openly suggesting more formal processes be introduced to take advantage of the opportunity to boosts revenue while improving patient satisfaction.

This selling example is just one small drop in a huge ocean of opportunity and in the interests of satisfying patients across the UK, and to help you launch a change in mindset that may lead to a cultural revolution in your practice, here are the Dynamic Perceptions’ top six tips to selling.

**Adapt your communication**

Selling skills are only effective when we learn to communicate properly. By recognising that people possess different personality traits we learn to change our approach to achieve the right result. What we say, how we say it – our tone of voice - and our body language are all ingredients of communication that we have to master. We do it naturally in everyday life; watch how an adult speaks to a baby, a teenager and a pensioner for instance; the tone of voice, speed and words used differ considerably.

**Align your services**

The patients visiting your practice do so because they feel some affinity for what you are offering. Your target customers are drawn to you because your services, your premises and your team all satisfy their requirements. So for instance if your practice is targeting the business client then the provision of early morning or late evening appointments would be a valued service and one that recognizes the specific needs of that target group. What do you provide for your target patients and how do you let them know that you offer this particular service just for them?

**Know your products**

We often find that practice staff do not understand many of the products and services provided. They are confused with different levels of private treatment and can’t explain differences between treatments or financial packages. It is imperative that everyone interacting with patients fully understands the products and services they are selling. It doesn’t have to be technical, but an awareness of the key features and benefits is paramount.

**Talk money**

We must be able to present the customer with details of how much the treatment will cost. We might not feel comfortable talking money but it is expected and necessary. Make the buying decision simple by breaking down the investment into bites of reasonable- ness. The treatment required to give your patients the smile they desire won’t cost £4,000; it will be an investment of ten equal monthly payments of £340 with an initial deposit of £600. The latter is much more receptive to the patient than the former. You should aim to meet the patient’s needs in the best way possible – obviously always legitimately and honourably.

**Close the deal**

How many ways do you know to ask for the order? When would you like to start? May I go ahead and book the appointment for you? Are you ready to proceed? As long as you have fully explained the benefits of treatment, it’s not unreasonable to ask for commitment from the patient. As the saying goes, what you don’t ask for, you don’t get.

**Breaking down barriers**

What’s it all for me? (WIIFM). The goal, a win-win outcome, is only achieved by overcoming barriers and concerns. We must learn to understand patients’ needs and wants, and to be able to express ourselves without sounding pushy or forceful. I learning to ask the right questions is of the utmost importance. Not all patients will be ready to proceed after the initial appointment but never assume that they never will.

It’s all about giving patients correct and honest information and providing them with options that help them find ways to best suit their financial circumstances. And regardless of what you want to call it, in any other industry that’s called selling. By engendering an environment where the needs of the patients come first and where the team is encouraged to constantly think of better ways of fulfilling those needs, you create a culture of confidence, support and success where selling is part of meeting the customers’ expectations. You are a business that provides a service and therefore everyone in the team must understand that it is OK to ask for money – and that it is OK to charge for services. After all, the customers understand it.

**About the author**

Lina Craven is the founder and director of Dynamic Perceptions. Over the past 25 years, she has assisted dental practices to realise their vision of success through the achievement of a customer-driven culture that focuses on delivering an exceptional patient journey. Lina’s qualifications and experience as an orthodontic therapist, treatment co-ordinator and practice manager in the US have given her a unique insight into the day-to-day practical problems faced by dental practices. Visit www.orthodontic-management.com or call 01844 275527.