‘They just aren’t interested’

Alun Rees discusses some reasons as to why you may be ‘short of work’

With the words “You only have one chance to make a good impression” ringing in our ears we make sure that every avenue of choice is explored for the new guests in our practice.

But what of the “old” (now there’s a derogatory word if ever I heard one) patients? Familiarity breeds contempt, has to be worked at during every visit; whilst it may be routine for the dental team, it is a very special event for the patient. After all nobody leaps out of bed in the morning and shouts out “Fantastic! Off to the dentist today, I do hope I have a problem that’s a real challenge to them.”

Our traditional attitude of putting the words “just a” before things doesn’t help either. Saying “just a” check-up or “just a” scale and polish for instance, although meant to reassure the patient, can also reduce their importance to the patient. “if it’s just a then it’s not important, is it?”

So how do you keep working at the patient relationship? Every couple of years treat them as if they were a new patient; re-discover what they want from you and what they want for their own mouth. Have their expectations altered since you last had your fact finding talk with them? Has all that marketing that you and everybody else have spent hard earned money on had some effect? You’ll only know if you ask; and by asking I don’t mean plonking the same old tired “smile check” in front of them, where the first reaction is like that to a familiar menu in a burger joint: “I know what’s on it so I don’t need to look.”

Get somebody else in the practice to talk (but what I really mean is listen) to them, this isn’t the place to extol the virtues of treatment co-ordinators, care nurses or whatever the fashion is calling them this year, but their use as a listener is needed some training in the communication methods that you are using. Do you and they truly believe that what you are offering is the very best that you can do, is the most appropriate and will enhance the patient’s health and quality of life? If not then the patient will know, the team will know and you will end up hating what you are doing.

Avoid discounting, however tempting it might be, it’s a slippery slope that leads to frustration and no practice or individual can stay healthy by trying to offer treatment to patients at a price that doesn’t make a profit - it’s a simple law of nature. A loss leader is still a loss.

Finally are you trying too hard to “sell”? People have an aversion to being “sold” anything but those same people are eager to buy benefits. They want to buy things that make them happy; in dentistry that might be the knowledge that their teeth will last until they die, that their smile will give them confidence and the knowledge that their mouth is as healthy as the rest of their body. Remember whatever it is that they buy they will only buy it from people who they know, like and trust.

With this solid foundation, Alun went on to launch two practices in the space of just 15 months, a challenge in the toughest economic conditions. After years of hard work Alun finally sold his award-winning business in 2005. Alun has found his drive and love for the dental profession is still “short of work”.

Talk to your patients to gain their trust