‘They just aren’t interested’

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

High on the list of problems I hear when working with a practice owner is that they are “short of work”. If these are just the ones that have chosen to work with me then it’s reasonable to assume that the problem is widespread and, from what I see, affects all sorts of practices whether fully NHS or 100 per cent private.

The little phrase “short of work” can cover a multitude of reasons and my first job is to find out what it really means. Being a coach means that I ask questions (lots of questions) and these are some of the answers that I get.

“They (the patients) aren’t interested.”

Really? Or do you just presume that? Scratching the surface I find that because a patient wasn’t keen on an elective X-rays, doesn’t mean they are a new guest in our practice.

But what of the “old” (now there’s a derogatory word if I ever 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 has to be changed from what I see, affects all aspects of practice whether fully NHS or 100 per cent private.

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.

And dental practices don’t escape from this; just because you have been seen the patient ten times over a five or six-year period and know them clinically through their notes and X-rays, doesn’t mean they know you enough.

People will only do business with people that they know, like and trust.

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 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 ten times proven beyond doubt. Tell the patient about recent advances in dentistry and changes in the practice and show them some of the work that you have been doing (by that I mean results or before and after views, not the blood and engineering pictures that make some implantologist websites need a viewing warning!)

Just because the work isn’t appropriate for them doesn’t mean that they can’t carry the value of it out into the wide world of their friends and family...and you do tell them how much you would value it if they were to refer friends and family don’t you?

“They won’t pay”

It was ever thus. I have been around long enough to remember being told by my first principal that when the NHS patient charge rose from £8 to £9 in 1981, that was the death knell of dentistry and they would “all stop coming”. But what of the “old” patients now? Patients who they know, like and trust. They want to buy things that appeal to them, happy; in dentistry that might be the knowledge that their teeth will last until they die, that their smile will give them confidence, 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.

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, that their mouth is as healthy as the rest of their body.

Here’s a word of warning!

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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 first practice in 2005. Alun is the founder and managing director of Alun Rees Dental Business Partners to offer specific and specialised support for dentists, by dentists. He has served as a media representative for both the BDA and BDHF and is an authority consulted by the media and various radio stations. Raised in South Wales, Alun has family roots in West Cork where he spends as much time as possible. In other space movements he has run three marathons and lots rugbys, real ale and music as relaxation.