

THE IMPORTANCE OF PATIENT SATISFACTION IN THE NEW DENTAL ECONOMY



By Roger P. Levin, DDS



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Introduction

Since the Great Recession, 75% of practices have experienced production declines. In today's more competitive environment, patient satisfaction matters more than ever. Therefore, all dentists should ask themselves this question: "How do I know that my practice is creating a uniquely positive experience and building strong relationships with patients?"

Dentistry is a relationship-driven field where most patients want to feel a connection to their doctor and the staff. In many instances, patients are willing to remain with practices for 10, 20 or more years based solely on their trust in the doctor and the team. Many dentists mistakenly view their clinical expertise as the primary source for patient trust and satisfaction. However, most patients base their opinion of the practice more on the non-clinical aspects of their experience, such as the team's friendliness and attentiveness.

Improving Patient Satisfaction

Validated by Levin Group's experience consulting with dentists since 1985, the following customer service strategies will help your practice increase patient satisfaction:

- 1. Get the most out of new patient phone calls.** Every team member who answers the phone should be pleasant, sound enthusiastic and demonstrate a desire to be helpful. In many practices, the front desk staff sounds rushed on the phone, giving the impression that they can't wait to end the call.

Callers need to feel that the staff member is focused entirely on them. This first impression sets a standard of caring and customer service that plays a major role in ensuring higher patient retention, case acceptance and patient referrals, well into the future.

- 2. Make sure appointments are available for new patients.** Nothing will disappoint new patients faster than discovering their first appointment can't be scheduled quickly. In addition, patients who have been presented cases and have agreed to treatment will rapidly lose their motivation if told they'll have to wait weeks to begin.

Using a proven scheduling system, such as Levin Group's Power Cell Scheduling™, ensures that appointments can be scheduled within 7–10 days of patients contacting the office.

- 3. Create a welcoming and attractive office environment.** Your practice—both its interior and exterior—should be pleasing to patients. Modern, up-to-date décor will help make patients feel confident that they have chosen the right practice. If a practice looks like it was decorated in the '90s, patients will rightly or wrongly infer that the clinical care isn't up-to-date as well.

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In addition to the décor, the practice should have comfortable furniture, clean and well-maintained restrooms, and a wide range of current and reader-friendly magazines. Amenities, such as bottled water, coffee and tea, can make your practice stand out from the competition.

- 4. Treat patients like VIPS.** Greet patients warmly by name. Give new patients a tour of the office, including the reception area, restrooms and operatories. Offer them a beverage if there's time before their appointment. Do everything you can to make patients feel welcome and appreciated. When new and existing patients are given the celebrity treatment, they will keep coming back to your practice.
- 5. Use a technique called the *The Golden 10*.** On each visit, learn something personal about patients. Asking about hobbies, interests and activities are excellent conversation-starters. The goal is to eventually know 10 personal things about each patient. Since most people enjoy talking about themselves, they are delighted to share this information. They quickly become comfortable with the team member they are speaking with.
- 6. Pay special attention to patients who refer others.** To generate greater patient satisfaction, the doctor should call patients to personally thank them when they have referred others to the practice. In a world of email and text messages, an actual personal phone call or a handwritten note from the doctor will have a genuine impact. We have observed the dramatic effect this technique has on referrals in hundreds of practices.
- 7. See patients on time.** People today are extremely busy. They will often walk into the practice with one concern on their mind—is the doctor running on time? When he or she is not, patients can become frustrated.

When patients are regularly seen on time, practices have eliminated often the biggest cause of patient dissatisfaction. If the practice is more than 15 minutes behind schedule, the front desk staff should immediately alert patients to this situation rather than ignoring it. Let them know how long the delay will be, offer a beverage and anything else that will make the wait more pleasant.

- 8. Elicit feedback during check-out.** The first question asked by a front desk staff member when a patient returns from the clinical area should be, "How was your visit today?" Patients are always pleased to hear this question and have the opportunity to give feedback, which is usually positive.

If patients have a complaint, the front desk coordinator should be trained and empowered to do whatever is necessary to resolve the issue. Any reports from patients of problems during treatment or dissatisfaction with the practice should be addressed immediately. Discussions in staff meetings will help team members understand what actions to take.

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9. Follow up with patients at home after their appointments. When the doctor or another team member makes an evening phone call to patients who have had extensive treatment, it reinforces to patients that their dental practice cares about them. By going above and beyond the typical interaction or response, you turn patients into practice advocates. These are the people who will tell their friends, neighbors and co-workers about the overwhelmingly positive experience they had at your practice. Such word-of-mouth testimonials are the most powerful form of advertising.

Conclusion

Although practice productivity is important, the primary goals of providing exemplary clinical care and an excellent patient experience must never be neglected. Ultimately, happy patients are far more likely to seek optimal oral health and serve as the foundation of a healthy, thriving and highly productive practice.

Dr. Roger P. Levin

Dr. Roger P. Levin is a third-generation general dentist and the Chairman and CEO of Levin Group, Inc., the largest dental practice consulting firm in North America. A keynote speaker for major dental conferences, Dr. Levin presents more than 100 seminars per year. He has authored 68 books and more than 4,000 articles. In 2014, he received the Dental Excellence Award for Best Practice Management Consultant from *DrBicuspid.com*. For the past 12 years, he has been named one of the "Leaders in Dental Consulting" by *Dentistry Today* magazine.



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