



WHAT CAN DENTAL PRACTICES LEARN FROM THE RITZ-CARLTON?

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Practice Production Whitepaper Series



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Introduction

Several years ago, Levin Group conducted extensive research on the topic of customer service in dental practices. The goal of the research was to benchmark dental practices against the best model for customer service we could find in the business world. After a careful review of various business fields, we identified the luxury hotel industry as having outstanding overall customer service. Their customer service is so exemplary that it far exceeds every other product or service industry.

We determined that the hotels representing the highest level of customer service were as follows: the Ritz-Carlton, The Four Seasons, The Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group (a luxury brand that strives to provide service that is “gracious and sincere and steeped in the values of the Orient”) and the Peninsula (which also trades on Asian traditions and “Hong Kong Service”).

The purpose of the research was to learn how these hotel chains operate. How do they successfully deliver superior customer service to guest after guest, day after day? Moreover, how can some of their strategies be adopted by dental practices? The basic principles, culture and attitudes that are pervasive throughout these hotel chains are very applicable for practices wishing to attain Total Practice Success™.

What Can a Dental Practice Learn From the Ritz-Carlton?

The Ritz-Carlton and other top hotel chains have created a well-defined culture around customer service. In the course of the study, I spoke with an interior design contractor who works frequently with the Ritz-Carlton. He revealed that when the Ritz-Carlton was about to build a new hotel in a major U.S. city, the first thing they did was to ask him to spend two weeks at one of their top hotel/resort locations in another city. The hotel's management wanted to give him an opportunity to understand the culture, service and attitudes of employees of the Ritz-Carlton.

The Ritz-Carlton begins by helping employees discern who their customers are. Hotel employees refer to their customers as ladies and gentlemen—even internally. The hotel has a clear set of commitments for each guest. When guests ask a question about where something can be found, an employee always walks them to that location. They use language like “my pleasure,” “certainly” and “no problem” in discussions with guests throughout the day. They are trained to solve guests' problems even if, at times, it costs the Ritz-Carlton money. This is the modus operandi created by the company's founder that allows Ritz-Carlton hotels to be built and operated successfully almost anywhere in the world. Regardless of the location, each Ritz-Carlton maintains its distinct culture and level of service regardless of employee personalities or varying cultural settings.

While the Ritz-Carlton builds excellent hotels, they do not rest their laurels on that fact alone. They place a great deal of emphasis on creating the best possible customer service experience. The same should be true for dentists. Most dentists are excellent clinicians, but they cannot rest on their credentials. Dental school teaches us to be excellent clinicians. However, imagine if it did even more than that. How much better would patient experiences be?

The source of Ritz-Carlton's success is not solely the great accommodations nor the food in the restaurants. Its great customer service plays a pivotal role. All employees of the Ritz-Carlton are indoctrinated into the concept of customer service as integral to their jobs. Customer satisfaction is their number one goal. Satisfied customers mean repeat visits and referrals.

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Applying the Ritz-Carlton Standard to a Dental Practice

Dental practices can easily adapt a number of Ritz-Carlton strategies to their offices with few modifications. Some of the examples include:

- 1. Have detailed staff meetings focused exclusively on customer service.** Every staff member should understand that there is a “culture of service” in the practice. Explain that outstanding clinical care alone does not guarantee great success in dentistry. Adding excellent customer service to excellent clinical care results in:
 - Increased patient case acceptance
 - Higher average production per patient
 - Higher average production per new patient
 - More total patients in the practice itself
 - Many more referrals
- 2. Focus the team on achieving superior attitudes.** Dentistry is a service business where there is no room for bad moods or attitudes. Fortunately, most staff members have excellent attitudes and work ethics. Most excel once they receive appropriate business management skills training. The staff member who cannot remain in the practice is typically one who, despite training, harbors an attitude inconsistent with the practice or other team members. Unfortunately, individuals like this can be very difficult to turn around.
- 3. Focus the team on convenience.** Considering the fact that dental practices are a service industry, most practices are not very convenient for their customers. Many dental practices have what was commonly referred to as banker’s hours. In today’s society, this is something of an oddity. In modern society, people work more and more hours, making dental appointments more and more difficult to schedule. While Levin Group does not advocate working more hours or adding evenings and weekends to the schedule, we do teach that in order to offset the inconvenient office hours, it is essential that customer service be exceptional, not just good. Practices should have a thorough understanding of patient needs and favorite appointment times. Through outstanding scripting, doctors and team members need to ensure that patients perceive that customer service and convenience are the practice’s top priorities.
- 4. Keep patients extremely comfortable.** With patients, comfort and convenience matter. Have the staff well trained that there are certain things that make patients more comfortable than others. These include blankets, pillows, beverages—even items like iPods already loaded with the latest popular music.

Always Go the Extra Mile

We were surprised to discover that these five-star hotel chains give their employees a great deal of leeway to satisfy guests’ needs. Examples include transporting guests in hotel cars when cabs were not available. Front desk people often reduce bills if the guest is not happy. Room service may be offered free of charge to satisfy a guest who had an issue during his or her stay. Even the people cleaning the rooms and vacuuming the hallways have some leeway to rectify a situation with a guest. This doesn’t happen without careful training and a culture that encourages doing the right thing for the customer.

Dental practices that become highly successful often try to follow a similar mentality. They go out of their way for patients. One example is the practice that will send transportation for patients over age 65 if they cannot get to the office on their own. In another office, a blind patient was having trouble getting to a nearby bank. To rectify the situation, the practice had a staff member take the patient to the bank, stay with him, then take him home. Some practices call patients at night and send flowers to patients who have had extensive treatment.

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Other practices have created a variety of unique ways to thank patients for referrals. Is all of this worth it? Without question, the answer is “Yes!” When people encounter superior customer service, it often makes a deep impression. A practice going the extra mile will become well known for its excellent customer service and quality of care. More importantly, these extraordinary customer service stories are related to family and friends. This type of word-of-mouth endorsement can be quite powerful.

How can a practice begin the process of truly superior customer service? It starts with a simple question. After treatment, front desk personnel should ask all patients, “How was your visit today?” It was interesting that one of our newer clients has a policy that if the answer is not positive, then the front desk person has the discretion to lower the bill by a certain amount. While this rarely happens in the office, it sets the stage for true customer service culture and a message that the staff is trusted and empowered to solve problems.

Conclusion

Studying four top hotel chains that are renowned for their customer service was informative and useful for application in dental practices. Practices that want to perform well in the future will be the offices that realize customer service is as critical to their practice as it is to five-star hotels like the Ritz-Carlton. It is important to remember that when people have to pay for services, they have many expectations—including outstanding customer service. Practices that deliver the kind of customer service their patients demand will always be in a growth phase!

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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