

# Is your front desk working for you?

*By: Julie Johnstone*

Do you know how your phone is answered or how your staff greets new patients? Many dental offices invest valuable time and money to promote their services but neglect to consider what happens when people call or arrive. It doesn't make sense to budget for marketing unless you are confident your front desk staff can effectively manage the incoming calls and patients. You can be the best dentist, but if a potential patient calls your office to inquire about your services and is turned off by their initial experience, your skill and reputation may not save that relationship. Likewise, you can do all the marketing in the world, but if incoming calls are not answered properly, it defeats the purpose. Even if you aren't doing a lot of promotion these days, keep in mind that, during the current economic situation, people are saving more and spending less. And they are increasingly discerning about who gets their business. So how can you ensure your front desk is working for you? How can your office best prepare for opportunities?

## **Do you consider your front desk a marketing tool?**

If you haven't thought about your reception area from a marketing perspective, I strongly suggest you do. After all, without any input from the rest of your office, the front desk has revenue generating potential on its own. Even more, as part of the whole office team, integrated into an end-to-end patient strategy, it can not only be a dynamic contributor to the bottom line, I believe the front desk is the most critical marketing tool in any dental practice. Remember that your reception area and staff can also turn people away! Unfortunately, this is a common problem with a surprising number of dental offices. When my consulting firm conducted an informal study of the front desk/telephone approach in dental practices across Canada, 60% of our call experiences left very poor impressions. How likely would a caller move forward and book an appointment after such an unsatisfying initial experience?

## **Marketing 101**

Once you've placed the front desk into your marketing toolbox, you need to bring it into your overall business strategy. There are three important principles you can easily incorporate into your practice that will ensure your front desk is ready. These are the top priorities in any strategy, namely, your objectives, audience and resources. For example, if dentists were permitted to develop advertising campaigns and you were seriously considering investing some of your marketing budget in this way, you would need to ask yourself the following questions before getting started:

What are my objectives, goals and expectations of this campaign?

Who do we want to "speak to" and what is the message we want to convey?

What resources do we need to accomplish these goals and deliver this message to our audience?

## **Sound strategy**

Adapting these fundamental marketing concepts specifically to the reception system of dental offices, I translate "objectives, audience and resources" into dental practice language and call them "plan, patients and people". These are the pillars of an effectively-managed reception area that contributes significantly to the practice. If you have a plan, focus on patients and train your people, you will earn the best return on your marketing investment.

## **Plan**

Have you reflected on your reception area lately? What is the patient perspective on the front desk? Start by putting your ideals on paper. Then evaluate how close you think your practice meets these standards. If this sounds daunting, hire a consultant to do an unbiased report. As the saying goes, make a plan or plan to fail. To help get you started, here are some points to ponder:

1. Automated telephone systems should not be used in a dental office. They might be a sign of the times, but most people like to speak to someone, especially if they have questions or want to hear alternative appointment times. An automated phone system creates no opportunity to focus on a caller's needs. Instead, it offers poor customer service.
2. I always insist we spend time training the front desk staff on how to answer the telephone. Staff training and development needs to be well-designed and planned ahead. Plus, it is a simple, yet effective way to instantly improve.
3. Have a sufficient number of front desk staff. They should not be overloaded with duties, but be able to greet incoming patients and receive telephone calls promptly. When patients arrive in the office staff should immediately give them the welcoming attention they deserve. Talk about the types of greetings you'd like your staff to use.
4. What are some of your dental practice beefs or customer service values that should be incorporated into your reception strategy? E.g. how long should patients wait in the reception area? Should follow up appointments be booked before they leave?

## **Patients**

Do you and your staff take the time to get to know and enjoy your patients? They choose to come to your office and would appreciate your efforts to build authentic, caring relationships with them. In one dental practice we implemented some relatively simple, patient-focused, front desk strategies with tremendous results. Incoming calls should be answered quickly and with a pleasant voice. When a patient or potential patient calls your office inquiring about a procedure or fee your staff must turn this into an opportunity; make it about the caller/patient. Most front desk staff members are overworked; if they are thinking about what has to get done before they leave, they will not be treating your patients like VIPs. Staff should take the necessary time to inform and/or educate the caller. By sharing the facts your staff will increase callers' comfort, understanding and the ability to make informed decisions, quickly. If your schedule doesn't allow you to see a new patient within a week of their telephone call you must revamp it. Work with an experienced management consultant who can implement a format that allows designated times for your new patients. They will also ensure the front desk staff is informed of and integrated into this system.

## **People**

Have you seen the benefits of building a plan and focusing on patients? Are you wondering how much time, energy and money is involved? Actually, implementing these ideas requires only two main things: good staff and good communication. Staff your front desk with employees who genuinely care about people and are willing to serve. Look for these qualities when selecting new team members. Ask references about their attitude towards customers, specifically. If you bring on friendly, outgoing people, you can always train them to convert an inquiring caller into a delighted new patient. Your receptionists need to be informed of your plan, expectations and about the services you provide. They can be trained on this; they don't necessarily need dental office expertise. Their skills and experience in previous jobs can bring a client-focused service approach and help them build strong relationships with your patients. In fact, some of the best front desk people I have ever seen do not come from the dental field! Rather, they had excelled in retail or customer service positions. Speaking of training, do it often and make it fun. Concentrate

on two skills or concepts each time. If you can't do it yourself, bring in a consultant who has training expertise.

Invest in your front desk and reap great returns Now you can see how a well-thought plan, patient-centred approach and quality staff are critical to the success of your overall strategy. I encourage all dentists to carve out the time to think about your goals, plan your approach, train and equip the right staff. Do this and you will be making one of the best business decisions. Conversely, if you don't ensure your front desk is properly equipped, you could be losing valuable patients and wasting well-intentioned marketing dollars. Invest in your front desk today - enhance your strongest marketing tool! DPM

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