Your Competitive Edge: THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

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Y our current clients are a powerful marketing tool that, coupled with an exceptional client experience, can create a steady flow of quality new patients. Referrals bring in business at little or no cost to the practice. Recent survey results from The McGill Advisory show that dentists recognize internal marketing as the most reliable, rewarding, and least expensive way to grow their practice. The 2013 survey also showed that doctors are doing worse at generating patient referrals than in previous years. This marketing strategy can be more effective than most any print advertising, yet few practices have an active, organized referral program or conduct systematic referral-gathering marketing campaigns. A well-designed series of strategies can drive patients to your practice.

How does a practice capitalize on this wonderful resource? Develop Trust

Trust is the bedrock of the patient experience, and an outstanding patient experience yields greater opportunities for referrals. If you’re worried about competition from a corporate dental chain in your area, this is a great differentiator. Long-term, personal, trusting relationships are not the hallmark of corporate dental chains! Strategies to build lasting, trusting relationships include:

• Displaying testimonial letters with “after” photos in the practice and on your website
• Providing video testimonials (50% more effective!) from satisfied patients
• Calling to welcome each patient the night before their appointment
• Sitting next to the patient while in the operatory, not standing above them while talking about the patient to team members
• Spending more time listening than talking
• Respecting the patient’s time and staying on time
• Personnally calling patients after any procedure requiring anesthesia

Once referred patients begin to come in the practice, your practice can see exponential gains. Support can be established faster with referred patients than with those who do not have any point of reference with your practice. Referred patients are more receptive to treatment presentations and are more loyal long-term. They readily trust the dentist because they trust the friend or associate who made the referral.

Refine the Patient Experience

The heart of your referral program is the overall patient experience. Are you confident that your patients are able to sincerely endorse your practice? That will involve you and your team objectively reviewing your practice. Evaluate how your patients experience your practice: Does the exterior of your building and the reception area match the quality of dental care provided and the overall experience they’ll have in your practice? What inexpensive cosmetic changes can update the image of the practice? How does it feel and sound when you call into the practice? Is there a warm, live voice on the end of the phone, or are you placed on hold or put through a series of recorded prompts? How are patients completing treatment exited from the practice? Many referred patients will go to your website after hearing of the practice. Compare your website to the website of three other practices nearby. How does your rank?

Strategies to take your patient experience up a notch include:

• Recognizing patients when they receive honors or experience a milestone
• Patient of the month recognition
• Smiles, handshakes, and warm welcomes by name
• A well-appointed exam room
• Holding regular morning huddles to discuss patients coming in that day and how to enhance their experience
• Communicating with your patients the way they want to be communicated with—by text, email, or phone
• Being friendly, warm, and enthusiastic—even when you don’t feel like it

Recognizing team members who do an outstanding job—happy employees create happy patients!

Asking for and Appreciating the Referral

As the owner and leader of the practice, you set the example of when and how to ask for referrals. Patient compliments are always an opportunity to ask for referrals:

• “We’re grateful to have you as a patient and we’d love to see your friends, because I know they’d be great patients too.”
• “I’m glad we have been able to help you, and to hear how pleased you are with our work. You’ve been an excellent patient, and we would be honored to see your friends and family.”
• “It’s great to hear that we’ve made you comfortable during your visit. We would extend the same to anyone you send to our practice.”

Referrals generate consistent productivity for the restorative schedule. Have each team member identify one patient per day to ask for a referral. Appreciating a patient’s homescreen and willingness to make investments in dentistry is then an opportunity to ask your patient to send in friends and family who share the same values. Include a sign in your reception area that conveys your desire and confident expectation that patients will refer others to your practice, such as “Thanks for the confidence you show in our practice by referring your friends and family.”

Engage your staff to be active and enthusiastic participants by seeking their ideas about how to thank patients for their referrals. While in some states it is permissible to provide incentives for referrals, such as promotional gifts to patients that a $10 coffee shop gift card will be received by anyone referring to the practice, in some states this has been determined to be a form of paying for referrals. We prefer an after-the-fact thank-you gift along with a short, hand-written note or brief, personal phone call. Dentists who do this find the gestures well-received. Start an idea file for referral requests and decade on appropriate thank-you gifts. An established referral reward program can take the place of expensive (and often less effective) external marketing—efficiently with the added benefit of greater case acceptance. But that’s a whole different topic for another article! 😊

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The Practice Support Team at Burkhardt provides business insight and strategies to Burkhardt’s doctors and our branch teams to help our doctors build stronger practices. Whether it is a valuable phone call, a workshop, or a Practice View, we have the resources to support your practice.

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