

The Relationship-Based Practice, Part V: *Foundations of Patient (Customer) Service—A New Attitude*



by
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You know where "Martha and Jim Swenson" went on their last vacation, and you know where they work. You might even know their golf handicaps! But does this social, superficial level of knowledge about your patients translate into the kind of patient (customer) service that really matters? Indeed, patients feel good when you know these things about them—it helps them feel good and creates an enjoyable social bridge. In today's dentistry, however, it simply is not enough. At the end of the day, if your relationship with a client is really more that of a social acquaintance, it will not provide the foundation necessary to help you and the patient through the challenging situations you are likely to encounter as real-life decisions about dental care are made.

Although many dentists lament the reality, more and more patients approach dental care decisions with the same frame of mind with which they approach other, more commodity-based decisions. The "consumer mentality" has taken hold and patients are behaving more like customers all the time. Whether you like it or not, you and your team must become prepared to work with patients in this way. What you know about your own expectations and tolerances as a consumer can guide you in determining how to provide the best patient (customer) care in your practice. The goal is to move beyond fluff to substance—those things that matter to your patients.

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Think about any time you went out to dinner, ventured into a shop, or took a flight. As a consumer, you likely would have been annoyed had you been ignored by a waiter or had the chefs mishandled your order; surly staff and lost luggage are intolerable under most circumstances. If service is slow or if the sales person is unable—or worse, unwilling—to explain the features of a specific product in ways you can understand, you are more likely to leave the store without making a purchase. You may take note of incompetence and make a conscious choice to take your business elsewhere.

Take a mental inventory of the services that matter to you and you likely will also be creating a list of the things that matter to your patients. Here are those things that get translated into dentistry in the three most important areas of patient concern.

THE ULTIMATE QUALITY OF THE DENTAL CARE YOU PROVIDE

Does it improve the patient's appearance? Does it restore function? If cared for properly, is it likely to last? Does it contribute to long-lasting dental health? Although patients cannot immediately determine the quality of your work, they often develop opinions about your clinical skills based upon what they *can* assess. They will look at the cleanliness of your facility and make inferences about your attention to detail at the chair. They will gauge your gentleness as an indication of your care about other aspects of their treatment. They will expect you to get it right the first time and will find re-dos (for whatever reason) annoying and inconvenient.

Patients have a right to—and will expect—that your clinical care will be high-caliber and that you will take into account those things that will affect the treatment they receive. While they may not have heard about and might not be able to relate to occlusion, for example, they will expect *you* to know about it, as well as about all the other elements that contribute to a satisfying solution. That is your job. As a clinician, you are responsible for five major categories: examination, diagnostics, prognostics, treatment planning, and delivery of care.

Patients want you to be thorough in your examination and to not cut corners that are important to them. They want you to be a careful and skilled diagnostician, able to learn both the nature and the cause of their problems. They want your serious opinion about the future they are facing and the likelihood of successful treatments for problems that will impede their quality of life. They want you to be complete in your treatment planning and offer as many options as possible within your standard of care, advising them of the relative pros and cons of each option. And, of course, they want you to be skilled and focused when you deliver treatment, as well as diligent in supervising those who provide auxiliary and ancillary services. And they want all of these things even in the face of the resistance they may sometimes put up. Like medicine that is good for them yet tastes bitter, they want you to take each of these obligations seriously even when they make it hard for you to do so. That is your job. If given the choice of expedience versus a better quality of care, few would choose to dispense with the latter.

THE WAY YOUR SYSTEMS WORK

Do you make things as convenient as possible for your patients? Do you attend to details that matter to them? Are your records, documentation, and accounting systems accurate? Do your working relationships with colleagues, labs, vendors, and referring practitioners run smoothly and predictably? Do you have reasonable contingency plans for unexpected events?

Very few patients will tolerate system breakdown for long. They believe, and rightly so, that part of your job is to run your business so that their affairs are handled with attention to detail

and a concern for their well-being. They want to know that their personal details are kept private, that their medical information is kept confidential, and that their financial records are accurate. They want to be able to trust your office to handle business details wherever possible, because they most likely feel unable to deal with entities such as insurance companies entirely on their own. They expect you to communicate and collaborate with specialists and laboratory providers in a timely manner. Regardless of how costly it may be for you, they would always prefer that you handle as many of these issues as possible and make it easier for them to navigate through a system that is foreign to them. They're not being "difficult" for wanting these things; they're being normal.

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Because they are the customer, they want it to be able to see you with little or no inconvenience; they want your hours to fit reasonably into the rest of their busy lives. They want to have reasonable access to you and your staff. While they will tolerate voice mail and perhaps even an answering service, they will expect calls to be returned as quickly as promised and that knowledgeable staff will handle their questions and concerns. They expect that you will have procedures in place to see them when unexpected events require your care—even if it is because they have delayed treatment longer than you suggested. And while patients generally hope for all of these things, none really expects you to be open 24 hours a day or to see them at the drop of a hat. While patients are high in their expectations, most are quite reasonable in their demands.

THE WAY YOU AND YOUR STAFF RELATE TO YOUR PATIENTS AND THEIR CARE

Do you know what they are hoping to achieve through your care? Do you know their concerns as well as hopes, their wants as well as needs, their hang-ups as well as the ways in which they are easy to work with? Have you made it "safe" enough for them to tell you the truth when things change? Do you give them a break when they are crabby or withdrawn? Do you understand and respect them? Do you always tell them the truth—even when you think they might not want to hear it?

Sadly, more patients leave dental practices because of the way they are treated outside the operatory than because of the way they are cared for clinically.

In most practices, as in most businesses, this is the arena that requires the most attention, for it is more about attitude than anything else. Most customers go elsewhere because they are treated with indifference by those who they rightly believe are there to serve them. Stores with good merchandise, restaurants with great food, and busi-

nesses with superior services go under each day. Sometimes it is because their business models are poorly planned, but most often it is because those whose job it was to provide a high caliber of customer service didn't do so.

In dentistry, customer service isn't just helping a patient with finances, for example. It is doing so with a real desire to help even when it takes a bit of work, an extra effort, and the patience of Job. It is not allowing the minimum required to become the new standard of performance. It is not ever making the patient regret having asked a question about an issue of importance. It is not allowing the paper to become more important than the people—the task more important than what the task is designed to accomplish.

Sadly, more patients leave dental practices because of the way they are treated *outside* the operatory than because of the way they are cared for clinically. Sometimes it's the little things, like the frustration and confusion that comes with staff turnover, or rarely getting a knowledgeable person on the phone. At other times, it is about big issues like being treated with understanding and respect. Too often, staff members express their annoyance when patients get in the way of their

work, with statements such as, "I didn't get a thing done today. The phone rang off the hook." These attitudes get conveyed to patients whether you realize it or not. And they have a huge impact on how patients feel about the practice as a whole; they can determine whether patients will bother to adjust to even the minor inconveniences you may ask them to tolerate.

Every member of the team is responsible for ensuring that the customer service your practice delivers is as meaningful to each patient as it is consistent. Attitudes such as, "That's not my job" or "Oh, no, Mrs. Jones again," must not be allowed even in thought, much less uttered; these sentiments must be banished in order for respect and understanding to take hold. A relationship-based practice requires everyone to pull in the same direction and focus on the patients rather than on themselves. By simply applying to your own work those criteria by which you judge those who serve you, you and your team can go a long way toward establishing a stable, productive, and successful practice for your patients... and yourselves. *AG*



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