How to Cultivate Loyal Dental Patients

Taking the time to get to know your patients on a personal level — and letting them get to know you — goes a long way when it comes to patient retention. Let’s face it, most people don’t like going to the dentist. If your chairside manner is impeccable and your dental team is friendly, your patients may actually look forward to coming to your office, which means fewer canceled appointments and good reviews on social networking sites.

7 ways to improve dentist-patient communication

1. Don’t do all the talking — Ask your patients how they are or if they’re having any problems and listen carefully to what they say.

2. Begin with an outline — Start your discussion with the big picture and work your way into more detail, asking your patient if they have any questions along the way.

3. Appeal to the patient’s values and priorities — If your patient mentions a preference for treatment, such as a long-term solution or a quicker, lower-cost solution, mention that in your discussion. For example, you might say, “You mentioned you preferred a long-term solution. That’s why I’m recommending a gold crown. It’s more durable than the other choices.” While reflecting their preference, do not ignore explaining other options. Dentists should disclose all options available to a patient in order to allow the patient to make an informed decision regarding treatment.

4. Don’t refer to teeth by number — Referring to teeth by number is a big no-no in dentist-patient etiquette. Call teeth by their names and reference their location: “The very back molar on your right side.”

5. Don’t tell patients what you would “like” to do — Be direct when explaining your treatment plan. “The ideal treatment is …” or “The treatment I would recommend for my own family …” is much better than saying, “What I’d like to do …”

6. Use patient examples — Personalize your recommendation by referring to other patients who’ve had similar treatments. Do be mindful not to disclose identifying information when using other cases as illustrations.

6 ways to impress your patients

1. Give the patient more than they expect — Work with your dental team to ensure that all communication with your patient is respectful and that every interaction is prompt and thorough.

2. Let the patient know if you’re running late — If you’re running behind, most patients will be impressed if you take a few seconds to poke your head into the waiting room and let them know when they can expect to be called.

3. Stay informed so you know what oral health issues or treatments are popular — Keep up-to-date on the treatments that are being talked about in the media. Your patients may ask you about a treatment they read about or heard of on television. The Science in the News section of the ADA website is a good place to start.

4. Make short follow-up calls to your patients after a difficult procedure — When you call a patient at home after an invasive procedure, you’ll be seen as a caring doctor and they may be more likely to refer you to family and friends based on your one-minute phone call to see how they’re doing.

5. Provide children with a treat after (or before) treatment — Children are usually encouraged by the “treat” they will receive at the end of their appointment, such as a sticker, pencil or other item, but stick to inexpensive items to avoid anti-kickback statutes. If the procedure is particularly difficult, you may even consider letting them pick out a small stuffed animal to keep them company while they are in the dental chair.

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