

HOW TO MAKE THE APPOINTMENT BOOK YOUR FRIEND

Lil Niddrie, Denplan Trainer, discusses how to use the appointment book more effectively to streamline the running of your practice and get your appointment systems working smoothly.

Used correctly, the appointment book can be the practice team's greatest ally. It can not only ensure that the reception room does not become a waiting room but it is also the cornerstone of a smooth-running practice.

However, the appointment book is also one of the tools we use day-to-day without really utilising it effectively and it is easy to take it for granted. By following the top tips below you can get your appointment system working seamlessly and ensure that you are taking full advantage of this valuable tool.

Manage new patients

It is important to make sure every new patient feels valued, as choosing a dentist is a significant decision and requires a feeling of trust in both the dentist and the practice. Therefore, when a new patient contacts the practice by telephone to make an appointment - why not send them a practice information leaflet, directions to the practice and a medical history questionnaire, together with their appointment card? By doing this you are not only reminding the patient of their appointment, but you are also reducing the time they have to wait in reception by saving them completing any forms when they arrive.

Book at short notice

If a patient calls for an appointment time which is not available, or they have to wait for a number of weeks for their appointment, you could ask them if they would like to be notified of any cancellations. By retaining and using an up-to-date list of patients who are willing to attend at short notice you can help ensure that cancelled appointments are filled and the appointment list is used efficiently.

It is also a great idea to give patients a courtesy call around 1-2 days before their appointment. This cuts down on missed appointments from patients that have forgotten or accidentally double booked, and also gives you time to book last minute appointments. Many practices have found that text reminders for those patients who have mobile phones are really effective or email reminders for those who have provided email addresses. This is also a great time-saving method for the practice team.

Keep it legible

As the appointment book will be read by most of the practice staff, ensure that your writing is neat and legible. This may sound obvious, but some of the most common mistakes in practice are often down to poor written communication. It is also important to use only recognised abbreviations, not your own version of shorthand, to ensure that entries can be understood by everyone.

A lot of practices are now computerised, so why not promote the benefits of computerised appointment books? This will be an effective solution if you have trouble reading other team members' handwriting, or even if you just want to make your appointment book more secure. Though this may reduce illegibility issues, you will still need to be clear about abbreviations and shorthanded notes.

Name names

Another way of making patients feel relaxed and appreciated is to ensure that they know which member of the team they will be seeing at each appointment. If your patient visits a particular dentist regularly, be sure to let them know, before their appointment, if their dentist is unable to see them, and the name of the replacement dentist who is seeing them.

This is particularly important for nervous patients, as they may have built up a level of trust with their regular dentist and may not feel comfortable seeing anyone else. If you leave it until they arrive for their appointment to inform them of this, they may not feel comfortable enough to go ahead with it and therefore it is wasted appointment time.

Give patients time

Be sure to allow sufficient time for patients to make their appointments, either in person or on the phone, and not to rush them. This is an effective and easy way of making patients feel valued and also gives them time to record the relevant details, such as the date, time and who they will be seeing at their appointment, in their diaries. This not only reduces the risk of missed appointments but also provides them the opportunity to explain any problems or concerns, which will put them at their ease and also help the dentist.

Be clear on charges

Appointment time is precious in any practice, so it is essential to make sure patients, especially new ones, understand the practice's policy on failed appointment charges. This will discourage last minute cancellations and no-shows, while also helping to keep the appointment book up-to-date, with more opportunity to fill cancellations with last minute appointments.

Alternatively, you could put this in your patient information leaflet or welcome packs to new patients. This may create an initial cost, but this expenditure can often pay dividends when it comes to cancelled appointments. Other options include a patient newsletter or adding this information to your practice website.

Zoning the appointment book

It is a really good idea to have allocated slots every day for emergency patients. This means that your scheduled patients do not have to wait for their appointment in the event of an emergency and your practice is far more likely to run more effectively.

Another effective management tool is to see nervous patients first thing in the morning before the practice gets too busy, in order to reduce their anxiety and reduce the risk of them having to wait. You could also aim to see children at the end of the day so they do not have to have time out of school. And, mixing them with your more nervous patients could release the potential for anxiety in both parties.

Children's days

Many practices have found it really useful to clear a day in the appointment book in the school holidays and have a children's day. You can provide fun activities such as face painting and use the opportunity to educate children on how to brush their teeth and what foods they should avoid. It also works well if the dentist spends the whole day doing examinations only, booking future appointments should a child require further treatment. This is an excellent way of seeing your children in one block, encouraging more regular check-ups and reducing the fear factor for children who may see the dentist as a scary place!

These tips are designed to give you a starting point, but if you wish to learn more about how you can streamline the running of your practice there are a number of handbooks and guides available, which can even be personalised to suit your particular practice's needs.

Alternatively, why not look into attending a training course to target any areas of improvement? Some dental payment plan specialists not only offer a range of structured training courses, but can also provide bespoke training for your practice to take place at a venue that suits you.

Notes to Editors:

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