

THE KEY TO GOOD COMMUNICATION

Mike Busby, former dentist and now a Dental Advisor for Denplan, discusses how dentists can improve their communication skills in order to retain existing patients and attract new ones.

Although the economic climate in the UK is at last showing the first signs of recovery, many of you may have noticed a change in the spending habits of your patients. It is essential, therefore, that practices do not become complacent and that you always strive to limit the effects of the current financial conditions on your business.

By improving your communication skills you can not only help to maintain the loyalty of your existing patients, but you can also start attracting new ones. The guide below will give you some valuable information about why communication skills are so important, help you communicate more effectively and ensure that your practice thrives, despite these difficult times.

Key findings

As dentists, we certainly cannot be considered competent without good practical clinical skills. However, overwhelming evidence shows that patients judge our technical competence on our ability to communicate.

One study¹, conducted in 1992, tested 75 statements about the 'ideal dentist' on 845 patients. The researchers found: "Behavioural components of the dentists' professional competence, such as communication and supportiveness, were considered the most important."

¹ Lahti S, Tuutti H, Hausen H, Kaariainen R (1992). Dentist and patient opinions about the ideal dentist and patient - developing a compact questionnaire Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology 20: 229-234

Another study², conducted in 1996, also delivers supporting evidence. In this study, researchers allowed 30 dentists and 30 patients to propose eight important criteria of 'good practice'. 334 patients surveyed on the proposed criteria ranked the three following highest:

- 1) explanation of procedures
- 2) sterilisation and hygiene
- 3) dentist's skills

Interestingly, the criteria proposed by dentists were generally ranked as less important by patients. Dentists felt, for example, that up-to-date equipment, pleasant décor and surroundings, cost, good administration and practice image might all be important. However the patients ranked these all in the bottom seven of the 16 factors.

Key Skills

The objective of our clinical skills is presumably to support patients towards achieving optimal oral health. In private practice this cannot be achieved without:

- Motivating patients to choose healthy behaviour
- Motivating patients to consent to interventions that improve their oral health
- Motivating patients to pay a fair price for the care we provide

The objective of our good communications skills is to retain our existing patients and to attract new ones. Never forget that a word-of-mouth recommendation carries much more weight than any advert could. By improving your communications skills you can not only make your current patients feel more valued, informed and comfortable, but they will be much more likely to recommend your services to other like-minded individuals.

Improving communications skills is however, not just for the dentists, it is something that should be focused on throughout the practice so that patients feel valued from the moment they walk into the building. This requires a motivated team with a commitment to working together to deliver excellent care.

² Burke L and Croucher R (1996). Criteria of Good Dental Practice generated by general dental practitioners and patients. International Dental Journal 46: 3-9

Key tips

Here are some tips on how your entire team can help improve patient communications:

- Get the greeting right – this applies to everyone who meets the patients at the practice. Try not to keep people waiting and always greet them in a friendly and approachable manner
- Browsers are welcome – if potential patients come to check you out, treat this as a chance to impress. Offer them a drink and answer all their questions as thoroughly as you can. If you do not know the answer, write it down and get back to them later
- If you are unable to address a customer's needs, find someone who can – also provide a phone number to help patients access NHS care if you don't offer it
- Use the customer's name and smile – don't forget to check how the patient prefers to be addressed; some people prefer a more formal greeting and others like to be on a first-name basis. Also, try to be aware if someone has a more unusual title such as Professor, Doctor, Lord, Lady and how they like to be addressed
- Acknowledge customers who are waiting – apologise for the delay and offer them a drink and some interesting reading or a magazine
- The last minute spent with the customer is very important – make sure they know you want to see them again and when
- Listen to complaints – complaints help you put problems right and avoid similar situations in the future.

Key training

Practices keen to improve their communication skills may find specific training of real benefit. Some payment plan specialists now offer tailor-made training days, which are specific to your practice's needs and can even count towards verifiable Continuing Professional Development (CPD) when undertaken in accordance with GDC requirements. This type of event provides an ideal opportunity for staff in similar roles to meet and learn together, and will benefit both your employees and your practice.

Training courses which you may find useful to improve your communications include:

- An Introduction to NLP - exploring the science of building rapport and positive relationships with others
- Communicating with Younger Patients - including communicating effectively during a dual parent/patient appointment
- Getting Your Consultations Flying - looking at how to improve the patient consultation visit.
- Improving Communication - covering areas including body language, tone, team communication, and giving and receiving feedback

It's clear that understanding your patients is key to maintaining successful communications. By following the steps above you are far more likely to target potential new patients more effectively and ensure the loyalty and a long-lasting relationship with your current patients – getting back to the days where people stayed with their practice from birth until old-age.

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Notes to Editors:

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