

The Patient Experience Matters Even in Times of Crisis

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As you struggle to establish a new normal, safety is rightfully your number one priority. Beyond -that, there are endless details and logistics to think about. Amidst the turmoil, it would be easy -to lose sight of the value of providing a good patient experience. Yes, it is possible, even in the middle of a pandemic. Here are some tips.

Make Sure Your Patients are Prepared

Most people are vaguely aware that dental appointments will be different, but probably do not know exactly what to expect. Therefore, they are likely to be a bit shocked, confused, or even angry when confronted with the reality. To avoid these issues, try to keep patients informed at every step.

Begin by updating information on your website to reflect current protocols and changes in your office. Also, discuss these issues on social media to keep your patients in the loop as the situation evolves. If you have removed displays, rearranged chairs, installed a plexiglass shield, or made other changes in your physical space, consider sharing some photographs.

When scheduling appointments, don't just read off a list of new rules and protocols. Explain what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how it will impact the patient experience. If you aren't allowing patients in the office until the appointment begins, make sure they understand that they might be waiting in the parking lot for a while. This allows them to prepare for potential inconvenience. It also provides an opportunity to explain the thorough sanitation measures taken between each patient.

Reiterate the most important points in reminder calls or messages. If you require masks and your office doesn't provide them, remind the patient to bring one.

Instead of avoiding difficult topics, open a conversation about them. The face-to-face nature of dental treatment makes it particularly high risk, which is something that you might not want to emphasize. However, patients are already aware of the fact, and your silence will not comfort them. What will make them feel safe in your practice is knowing that you take the risk seriously, and what you are doing to minimize it.

The New Normal in Patient Satisfaction Criteria

Patients have changed, too. Before COVID-19, dental and medical practice reviews often focused on amenities, atmosphere, friendliness, and convenience. People wanted an experience that felt more like a spa getaway or a visit to the local coffee shop than a dental appointment. In many cases, the essential elements of care such as sanitation and clinical quality slid far down the list of priorities. That is no longer the case.

People are more aware of contamination risks and less interested in luxurious accommodations. The [Consumer Perspectives survey](#) by Beryl Institute shows that communication, quality of care, and infection control are more important to patients across the healthcare spectrum than just a few months ago.

The survey also found that, despite restricted access to care, overall patient satisfaction ratings have increased. That speaks volumes about the importance of safety and security above convenience. In these uncertain times, people want to feel confident that you are protecting them and looking out for their well-being.

Optimizing the Patient Experience

These new patient priorities will likely extend beyond COVID-19 precautions. People will always appreciate pampering, especially as we move further from the pandemic and closer to normal. However, the days when pampering was the secret to happy patients are gone, at least for the foreseeable future.

If you're looking for ways to optimize the patient experience, consider:

- **Upgrading communication:** Do you give patients a choice of email, phone, or text appointment reminders? Are the phones always answered during business hours? Can patients contact you by text or email if they wish? Is there a chatbot on your website for 24/7 interactive communication? Do you respond to comments and messages on social media? Ideally, you should be able to answer "yes" to all of these questions.
- **Keep it clean:** Sanitation and cleanliness are not always the same. A dusty countertop that obviously has not been touched recently, litter in the parking lot, or streaked windows might not pose a risk of transferring disease. However, they might be seen as signs of your overall cleanliness standard, which is suddenly of paramount importance. Patients want to see a spotless office.
- **Communicate quality standards:** When explaining a procedure, you might focus on steps you take to make it painless or the aesthetic benefit of the result. Most people did not want to hear about oral health benefits, biocompatibility of materials, or your dedication to clinical excellence before the pandemic. Suddenly, basic health and safety is a high priority. Make sure your patients understand that those issues are high on your priority list as well.
- **Demonstrate empathy and compassion:** Some people are afraid of dentists. Some are worried about COVID-19. Some are simply over-stressed by the new challenges of daily life. Try to take an understanding and reassuring tone in patient communications. Let people know that you understand their situation and you care.

Conclusion

You worked hard to make dentistry pleasant, and you were rewarded with excellent satisfaction ratings. Then, a pandemic struck. Many of the things your patients loved are no longer possible or relevant.

It would be easy to give up on providing a great patient experience under the circumstances, but it would also be a mistake. Your patients are seeking a different kind of experience, prioritizing quality care and safety, which you already provide. Simply keep your standards high, keep patients informed, and keep their trust, and you will keep a high level of patient satisfaction.

Mr. Arulrajah, president and CEO of [Ekwa Marketing](#), has been a leader in medical marketing for more than a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dentists, with a team of more than 180 full-time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you're looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call (855) 598-3320 for a free strategy session with him.