

It's Not Just About New Patients – Tips for Increasing Retention

April 3, 2020

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Not everyone will come back. It's a simple fact that every business owner must come to terms with, but the percentage for dental practices is higher than many industries. According to some reports, an attrition rate above 201 percent is normal. Of course, that means it is higher in some offices, and lower in others.

Improving patient retention not only improves your bottom line, but also makes every new patient more valuable, which increases marketing ROI. Here are six simple strategies to help you do just that.

Answer the phone

We've all been there. You have a scheduling conflict or urgent question and need an answer now. It is within business hours, so you call. After navigating a lengthy menu, you end up with automated voice mail. Whether the issue is an auto repair appointment or a delayed supply order, the frustration is real and reflects poorly on the business. Just imagine how your patients must feel when the issue at hand is their oral health, or unbearable tooth pain.

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To optimize your patients' calling experience, you need to consider both the people and technology involved. Make sure you have adequate staffing, and that they prioritize answering the phone as soon as it rings. They should be well versed in your services and policies so that

they can answer simple questions promptly and accurately. Additionally, phone systems should be up-to-date and adequate to handle call volume. If there is anything worse than voicemail, it is a glitchy system that drops calls.

Upgrade your office

You might say that you've invested heavily in equipment and devices, your office is already state-of-the-art. However, your perspective is very different from that of your patients. Clinical care is only a portion of the patient experience, which begins long before a person meets you.

Take a walk around your office, trying to see it through your patients' eyes. Is there enough parking? Is the reception area welcoming, stark, or shabby? Are the chairs comfortable? How reliable is the Wi-Fi? Do you have refreshments or snacks available? If you see kids, do they have a play area? Continue this line of thinking to the treatment rooms. Are they comfortable and aesthetically appealing?

Improve scheduling

Dentists are at a distinct disadvantage compared to many types of businesses. People might be eager to return to a good beauty salon or restaurant. However, virtually no one is excited about a dental cleaning, no matter how good the service is.

The first step to getting a patient back is scheduling another appointment. Ideally, this should happen in your office, before the person leaves. Don't count on a text, email, or postcard reminding the patient that it's time for a checkup. There is a good chance he or she won't bother picking up the phone and calling. In fact, failure to pre-schedule can increase patient attrition by 15 to 18 percent², according to the Levin Group Data Center.

Provide customer service training for your staff

The dentist is one of the last people a new patient will meet and interact with. The first impression usually comes from the initial phone call when the appointment is scheduled. Next is the receptionist who greets the person upon arrival, likely followed by a hygienist or assistant. If the person is already disgruntled or offended, you have an uphill battle to turn things around and have a happy patient.

When you hear your office or clinical staff interacting with patients, pay attention to their mannerisms, tone of voice, and actions. Are they friendly and respectful? Does the receptionist answer questions accurately and encourage people to schedule? Are your clinicians gentle and attentive?

Make people feel important

No one likes to feel ignored, especially when their health, comfort, and appearance are at stake. Although multi-tasking is the norm in a busy dental office, patients need to feel like they are seen and heard. If your receptionist never stops typing or looks up from the computer when greeting a patient, and you are discussing supply orders with your assistant while performing an exam, the patient is going to feel slighted.

During treatments and exams, try to give the patient your undivided attention. If there are questions (even nonsensical ones), answer them seriously and respectfully. Similarly, the office staff should warmly greet people as soon as they walk in, as well as offering assistance or information when needed. Last, but certainly not least, express your gratitude. Let patients know that their patronage is appreciated.

Expand your marketing efforts

The number one goal of dental marketing is new patient acquisition. However, that should not be your only goal. If you want to keep your existing patients, you should be marketing to them as well.

An opt-in newsletter is a great way to keep them apprised of new staff members, changing office hours, added services, and other news from your office. It also helps keep your name fresh in their minds. Although email marketing has declined in popularity over the years, it remains effective. In fact, about 80 percent³ of small and midsize businesses rely on email as their primary customer retention strategy.

Final thoughts – making patient retention a priority

When creating financial projections, it is prudent to consider your current attrition rate as standard, and plan for it to continue. However, when evaluating your marketing and practice management strategies, you should take your attrition rate as a challenge – a number to beat.

Review your records to see which patients you are losing and try to determine the reason. Did the front office try to pre-schedule during the person's last visit? For the patients who refused to schedule: did they give a reason? For those who scheduled and canceled: what efforts were made to reschedule? For no-shows: were appointment reminders sent in advance, and were attempts made to re-schedule?

Another great source of information is patients themselves. Don't automatically discount complaints, bad reviews, or lukewarm responses on patient surveys. Ask yourself if you or your team could have done anything different to provide a better experience. Even better, ask that question from the unhappy patient, if you have the opportunity. Also engage in conversation during appointments. Be open to feedback and suggestions.

Find out what patients want and make an effort to deliver it. If you succeed, they will come back.

1. Gerry McGoldrick, Still think you need new patients?
<https://www.dentaleconomics.com/practice/article/16386275/still-think-you-need-new-patients>
2. Roger Levin, How to Cut Patient Attrition by 50%
<https://www.dentistrytoday.com/news/todays-dental-news/item/5061-how-to-cut-patient-attrition-by-50>
3. Maryam Mohsin, 10 Email Marketing Stats You Need to Know in 2020
<https://www.oberlo.com/blog/email-marketing-statistics>

About the Author



Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, has been a leader in medical marketing for over 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 Naren.

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