



Patient Communication Ideas for the Modern Era

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These days it's the little things that truly separate an average dental practice from a great one. All patients like the idea of a meticulous dentist performing pain-free, minimally invasive dentistry with skill and precision. In the past, satisfying this incredibly challenging form of dentistry, in and of itself, would have been enough to elevate your dental practice to the upper echelon. But is that the truth in today's dental climate? I don't believe so. I feel that in order to consider itself a modern, upper-echelon practice, a dental practice must extend the same meticulous attention to detail from their "back of the house" (dentist, hygienist and assistant) to their "front of the house" (front desk and office management). There are numerous categories of examples that might be cited to support my point, but let's discuss one of the largest here today: patient communication.

In today's technologically driven world, the modern dental practice must be experts in more methods of communication than ever before. While this does place a lot of extra pressure and workload on employees, it also provides more opportunities to shine and demonstrate what an amazing dental practice you have. Let's review a few ideas on patient interaction via telephone, social media, after-hours emergency number, email and fax.

Telephone

One of the oldest "rules" of the dental office is that you should answer your office telephone by the third ring. Quite an easy thing to say — not necessarily an easy thing to do! Average and peak call volume, average and peak in-office patient volume, office space square footage and number of front-desk employees manning the phones are just a few variables in this tricky equation. The three-ring rule is something that elite offices strive for on a daily basis. I should add that what you do after you pick up the phone by the third ring is just as important. A knowledgeable conversation should ensue, or else the potential benefits of answering by the third ring are diminished.

Social Media

If you're going to have social media accounts, you need to use them properly. Effective patient communication can happen via a variety of methods, but you can't deny the importance social media plays in the daily lives of patients. Your office doesn't need to jump on every new trendy platform that comes out, but it does need to use what it has. For example, how quickly does your office respond to a Facebook message? How about a mention or a direct message on Twitter? If you

have accounts, you need to continuously monitor them, especially during the workday, and respond as quickly as you can.

Afterhours Emergency Number

Much like social media, if you're going to have an after-hours emergency number, use it. Promptly answering emergency calls is a tried and true method of delivering phenomenal customer service to your patients. Don't delay your callback, and don't pawn calls off on your younger associate when patients think they're going to reach you. Consider your after-hours emergency number as an extension of your main office phone and you'll please a lot of patients.

Email

I know it seems simplistic, but an email should be sent when it's said that it will be sent. One of my biggest frustrations is when a new patient states they've contacted their prior dentist and requested their most recent radiographs be sent over ... and the radiographs never arrive. Sure, there are many explanations for this, but sadly the most common by far is that the past office "just didn't get to it yet." Another pet peeve of mine is a front desk staff that does not understand how to use secured emails. These days an email containing any protected health information (PHI) should be sent via secured email. My staff routinely deals with other offices that can't open, send, or utilize these files correctly. PHI is very important. If your office isn't doing this already, please investigate updating your practices as soon as possible.

Fax

Consider ditching the traditional stand-alone fax machine and instead use your computer as the fax machine. You might be amazed at how efficient and easy it will be for your staff. If you still desire to use the stand-alone fax machine, make sure it's not the original one you purchased for the office decades ago. These machines have come a long way since then, and a brand new one won't set you back much at all. You wouldn't want to paint your office in a bad light by faxing barely legible documents, would you? If you don't know what your fax quality looks like on the receiving end, coordinate with another AGD member's practice and send test faxes to each other.

While there are countless ways to measure or determine if a particular dental practice truly is stellar, one of the most important is undoubtedly how the office responds to patient inquiries. This multifaceted metric is continually evolving, so persevere and strive for excellence every day!

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