

Mayer's Message

TOPICS FOR TEAM MEETINGS

Sometimes a dental practice feels like the busiest place on the planet. Even though new technology, both clinical and administrative, makes our lives easier and allows us to do our jobs more efficiently, we still are often overwhelmed with just getting through each day.

In this hectic environment, it takes a concerted effort to make the time to communicate with each other. I heartily recommend that a one and a half hour block of time be reserved once each month for planning and reflecting. What are we doing well as an office – but how can we improve even more? On what shortcomings that we previously identified have we not taken the appropriate action? The following is a list of topics to get the ball rolling.

1. **What can we do to ensure that patients feel welcome in our office?** Your definition of customer service should be to equal or exceed the expectations of your patients for every interaction with them. The importance of consistency can not be overemphasized.

There is nothing worse than “schizophrenic” customer service. Someone is totally impressed with their introductory telephone call as a new patient. They are absolutely “wowed” by the effort to build a strong and caring relationship right from the first contact with the office. But perhaps when they arrive for their first clinical visit, they are not recognized with a smile, receive a greeting by name and are merely treated like a number. This type of inconsistent behavior must be avoided at all costs. It is so easy to distance yourselves from your competition by offering exquisite customer service – but it must be consistent. I advise my clients to think more like a consumer – and not like a dentist.

2. **How comfortable is our office and how can we make improvements?** Evaluate the reception area and the treatment rooms. Think about sounds, smells and temperature. A modest office makeover is not that expensive – carpet, fresh paint, maybe an upgrade to reception room furniture and fixtures. I think as a rule of thumb you should be thinking about this every five years.
3. What special comforts do we offer and what else could we provide?
 - o Coffee, cold drinks, fresh fruit in the reception area.
 - o Aroma therapy in our treatment rooms.
 - o Warm lemon scented towels after dental treatment.
 - o Head sets for iPods or CD's in the treatment rooms.
 - o Fresh flowers at the front desk.
4. Making someone feel special whenever possible is, in my opinion, the key to success. I am a strong advocate that at a patient's first visit, someone from the front office staff should invite them into a private area and sit with them to assist in filling out the new patient information. This is such a nice touch, and really makes a patient feel special. Just another opportunity to build strong relationships.

Evaluate your office position on patient protection (as opposed to “infection control”). Many patients evidently are concerned about this issue but are afraid or reluctant to ask.

How should we initiate discussion with them and not wait for them to ask. Should you consider printed information as a hand out for all of your patients?

5. Does your sterilization area look pristine? The sterilization area needs to glisten! It needs to look immaculate and high tech. It should be a major clinical staff responsibility to maintain that look. Any signs need to be laminated. Nothing dirty should ever be in view of a patient being escorted by that area.

The dental supply companies do a very good job on their sterilization centers. And while I am not a big fan of spending money on dental company cabinetry – I think it is grossly overpriced – I do believe it is worth the money to “buy into” the steri-center idea from them.

6. **Evaluate the first impressions that we convey to our patients.** We only get one opportunity to make a great first impression.
 - o Initial telephone contact – I made reference to the importance of this call earlier in this article.
 - o The initial patient visit. Responsibilities of doctor and staff. This should be a carefully orchestrated system planned down to the last detail. The trick is to make it look spontaneous and un-rehearsed.
 - o Exit surveys. Sometimes we can get some good feedback from patients about their dental experience. The important thing here is not necessarily what we hear back from a patient. The important thing is that our patients know we care about their concerns and that we will be anxious to respond to their suggestions.
 - o Answering machines/systems – quality of the message – friendliness and sincerity of the voice. Any message must be clear and distinct, not rushed, and recorded with no background noise.

A pet peeve of mine is the improper usage of the end of the day message during normal business hours. A patient calls at 11:00 in the morning on a normal business day, and because the front desk may be overwhelmed, they put on the end of the day message that talks about hours of operation! It is my opinion that every office should have an upgraded telephone system which will allow three separate messages to be recorded. They should be as follows:

- o An inter-day message that can be used when there is no one to answer the phone at certain times during a business day. This message says that you are in the office but assisting other patients. “Your call is very important to us. So please leave us your contact information, and we promise to return your call with 45 minutes.”
- o The end of the day message with hours of operation and how to be reached for an emergency.
- o And a third message that can be used for special occasions like when you are away for continuing education during a normal business day.

Be sure that the agenda for each meeting is posted ahead of time so that everybody can come prepared. Participation should be mandatory, and these meeting times should be sacrosanct. It is the responsibility of the doctor to create

a warm and nurturing environment where all staff will feel comfortable sharing ideas and offering suggestions.

The most common denominator of extraordinary dental practices is the will to be extraordinary. Not only to be successful but to be unique. Make the time to communicate and put in the effort to follow through. You will be amazed at what can happen.

Dr. Levitt has been a great friend of The Madow Group for many years, and is one of the best resources for practice management efficiency tips in dentistry. He is the president of Jodena Consulting, offering personalized advice for business and practice management since 1989.

Dr. Levitt also trains successful dentists who are at, or near the end of their clinical careers to become consultants in their area of the country. For more information, call him at (401) 421-3615, email him at jodena@cox.net.