Want long-term patients? Address the obvious ...

By Sally McKenzie, CEO McKenzie Management

While many dentists tend to be overly concerned about the number of new patients coming into the practice each month, patient retention is where practice profitability is best achieved. The ability to retain patients makes a big difference in the patients’ average value.

It’s been shown that if patient retention is at 50 percent, the average value is $1,200 per patient. If you retain 75 percent of patients, the average value jumps to $2,500. In other words, patient value more than doubles.

Two things in particular are essential to retaining long-term loyal patients: First, address the common dislikes and frustrations. Second, build positive personal relationships. Chatting with the patient for five minutes or less every six months is not building a relationship. It requires a bit more consideration and effort than that, but will pay huge dividends in the long run.

Start with your new patients by establishing a system in your office in which every new patient is sent a handwritten personal thank you note from the dentist, no exceptions. Keep it simple and straightforward, but also personal, for example.

Dear [Patient Name],

It was a pleasure meeting you at your new patient appointment on Wednesday. Thank you for choosing our practice. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at any time. And best of luck to your daughter in her upcoming soccer season!

Sincerely,

Dr. GoodDoc

Better yet, give new patients a brief call a couple of days before their appointment to introduce yourself. I guarantee the patient will be utterly stunned and thoroughly impressed. The key is personalization. A personal phone call and a handwritten, personalized note carries far more weight and value to the recipient.

While I’m on the topic of thanking patients, don’t overlook your referring patients. They have paid you and your team the highest compliment. Sending flowers or other “showy” gift to the workplace is one of the best ways to generate a “buzz” about your practice.

The fact is that anytime someone receives flowers, everyone wants to know what the occasion is and whom they are from. In addition, if everyone is talking about your practice, it’s likely to generate even more referrals.

Address the realities of fear and pain

Next, minimize those aspects of the dental visit that patients dislike the most, starting with injections. There are products on the market today that enable you to give injections that are truly painless. This is particularly important when giving a shot in highly sensitive areas, such as the palate or upper incisors. These are experiences that patients remember for better or worse. Moreover, don’t overlook topical anesthetics for dental hygiene visits to minimize discomfort as much as possible.

Consider fearful patients. Many dentists would rather avoid them as much as such patients want to avoid the dentist. Certainly, anxious patients are a common source of stress for dentists who receive very little training in managing and caring for them. One of the most critical steps a dentist can take in handling anxious or phobic patients is to listen to them.

The fears of the patient will be as individualized and unique as the patients themselves. Taking extra care and time to build a relationship with the patients first and address their dental needs second is vital. It’s a process of gaining and keeping the patients’ trust.

Give patients the opportunity to talk about their fears. Ask them if they have had any negative experiences in the past, if they have concerns about dental treatment, about injections, anesthesia, drilling, etc.

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Shade matching for indirect restorations using a remote laboratory

By Barry F. McArdle, DMD

Ideally, shade matching for indirect restorations would occur with a laboratory technician in the dental operator performing this function directly. Yet, in reality, according to the most recent statistics on the subject published by the American Dental Association in July of 2009, less than 5 percent of all dental offices in the United States have an in-house dental laboratory.¹

The reality dictates that the vast majority of the more than 40 million indirect restorations placed each year in this country are fabricated at remote dental laboratories and because an exceedingly high percentage of those are tooth colored, shade matching becomes a critical challenge for the dentist in these situations.

There are four key areas involved with accurately accomplishing a shade match for an indirect restoration: the quality of the clinical preparation, the restorative material used, the skills of the lab technician involved, and the quality of the clinical records provided to that technician.

This article will explore the last consideration as it is very often the most demanding of the four and to my mind the least well elucidated.

Color

What is shade matching? Shade matching is all about color and so a review of the Munsell color system would be a good place to start. Color is described as the energy of visible light (at varying wavelengths) reflected off a surface as expressed in the elements of that system: hue, chroma, and value.

Hue is what the layman calls "color," and it corresponds to the particular wavelengths (expressed in nanometers) at which light is visibly reflected. The visible spectrum of light energy is from about 380 nanometers (shorter, violet spectrum light) to about 700 nanometers (longer, red spectrum light). The hues of natural tooth shades fall between the mid 570s to about the mid 580s (Fig. 1).

Chroma refers to the depth or strength of the hue. The higher the chroma, the more intense the hue (color), while a low chroma results in a more diluted hue (Fig. 2).

Value is the concentration of gray (color), while a low value results in a more grayed hue (Fig. 3).

Dental patients are notably more sensitive to the value parameter of the Munsell color system rather than hue and chroma in how they perceive a dental restoration's shade.² Thus, the answers to those questions can be very bit as important as the routine health history questions posed. Not only will the patients' stress levels go down, so too will the dentist's.

Many anxious or phobic patients feel more at ease in the dental chair and this can be particularly traumatic. Helping them to feel that they have some control is critical. The most common approach is to establish a signaling system in which the dentist will stop working if patients raise a hand for any reason — perhaps to ask a question or because they might want to rinse. The key is to ease their fears by emphasizing they have more control of their circumstances.

In addition, it is vital that team members are sensitized to the special needs of this type of patient. Putting the patient at ease the moment he/she walks in the door will go a long way in improving the entire experience. Dental teams should tune into the patient's body language such as breathing rates, perspiration, and not if the patient is unusually quiet or particularlyohonorable.

How is the patient holding his/her body? Is he/she gripping his/her hands? Do you see muscle tension? Dentists and dental teams that take the time to get to know and understand fearful patients often find that they become the most loyal patients, your biggest fans and a fantastic source for patient referrals.

Subtle messages have a big impact

Watch your timing. Neither the patient nor the dental team appreciates it when staff runs behind schedule. It's essential that the scheduling coordinator fully understand how much time is required for procedures.

Additionally, consider checking hygiene patients when it is convenient for you, the dentist, not at the end of the hygiene appointment. This requires a little adjustment at first, but can significantly improve efficiency.

In addition, pay attention to the subtle messages that the employees send to patients, specifically, their smiles. If your assistant can smile with confidence and tell the patient that Dr. GoodDoc is her dentist and he is absolutely the best, this has a huge positive impact chairside in selling treatment. Moreover, it will make the team member feel good about working for your practice.

Most importantly, make it easy for your patients to pursue treatment. They like you. They like your team. They trust your recommendations, but they are afraid of the price tag. Provide financial options. Offer 10 percent off if they pay with cash or check. Consider 5 percent off if they use a credit card and pay at the time of service.

Provide outside financing options as well. The 12-months interest-free financing that CareCredit offers is my personal favorite. All you have to say to the patient is, “How does 12-months interest-free financing sound to you?” and he/she is usually thrilled to pursue your recommended care.

Finally, don’t disappear for six months. Keep your name in front of your patients. Send birthday cards, articles, magnets, electronic newsletters, recipes, etc.

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Sally Mckenzie is a nationally known lecturer and author. She is CEO of Mckenzie Management, which provides highly successful and proven management services to dentistry and has since 1980. Mckenzie Management offers a full line of educational and management products, which are available on its website, www.mckenzie_mgmt.com. In addition, the company offers a vast array of business operations programs and team training.

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