

Creating a Lasting Impression

The Importance of Front Desk Etiquette in your Dental Practice



While the skill of the dental practitioner is important, it is just as important that the patient has a great first impression when walking through the door before their treatment. The front desk dental receptionist plays a critical role in achieving this as they are the face of the dental practice – they are the first point of contact and create the first impression regarding the quality of the dental practice. Therefore, having a good etiquette is paramount in not only maintaining an existing customer base but also growing it, aiding in the success of a practice.

What is etiquette?

Etiquette can be described as “a set of rules that helps people understand how they should behave in particular business or professional situations”.

The following reading will provide insight into front desk etiquette in a dental setting and ways in which it can help improve and add value to your dental practice.

Front Desk Attire



Appearance plays a big role in creating a good first impression for those who walk through the door therefore, it is important that front desk staff dress in a professional and acceptable way which adds to the patient's experience. A receptionist who is dressed too casually might give the impression that the practice is too laid back and as a result not able to meet the needs of their patient. The converse of this is if the receptionist is too buttoned up, they might create an impression of being closed off and unfriendly. This potentially could add to the anxiety of an already nervous patient. Therefore, it is important that a dress code with clear expectations is communicated to front desk staff. When implementing a dress code, it is suggested that the location and vision of the dental practice is considered. The ideal dress code should present a professional, warm and competent image to patients.

A few general guidelines to be considered:

- Clothes and uniforms should be well fitted, clean and pressed
- Avoid excessive hair ornaments
- Avoid big jewelry and noisy bracelets

- Men should be clean shaven or facial hair neatly groomed
- Name tags to be worn at all times on upper right-hand chest area
- Clothes should not be revealing or too tight
- Skirts should be no more than 5cm above the knee
- Avoid bright and excessive make up
- No food and drink visible to patient
- No gum chewing

Etiquette over the telephone



Before delving into face to face customer experiences it is important to start with telephone etiquette. Besides being the face of any dental practice, the front desk is also the voice. Whilst we are in a digital era and many customers are moving towards electronically scheduling appointments, there is still a fair number of customers who call in to book an appointment. It is crucial that the first point of contact, that is the front desk is well versed in handling calls in a professional, competent and friendly manner. Poor customer service is a significant precursor as to whether potential patients decide to book an appointment with your practice or not. Studies suggest that there are a few tips that can improve the likelihood of a customer having a good experience over the phone.

These include:

1. Before Answering the call:

Maintaining good posture and smiling when answering the call has been said to improve the way you sound over the phone. Smiling causes a release of endorphins which will provide a more positive, enthusiastic and friendly tone. This will be evident to the person you are speaking to. Maintaining good posture by sitting up straight will allow you to be better focused which will help you in dealing with questions from potential patients. It is also important that phone calls are answered quickly – they should not be left to ring endlessly. If for some reason you need to put the caller on hold, make sure you first inform them and get back to them quickly. It is important that the caller knows that you value their time.

2. Professional and polite language:

When conversing with potential patients, always remember to speak professionally. Do not allow yourself to get too casual. Speak clearly and politely, undistracted. When answering the call, it is recommended to have a scripted greeting in place such as, “Welcome to XY Dentistry, you are speaking to Clare, how can I help you?”

3. Well Knowledgeable:

More than likely, your potential patient will have questions regarding the practice, what services you offer, whether you accept medical aids and which ones, and how busy the dentist is, among other things. Therefore, it is important that the receptionist is well versed in the happenings of the practice and should be included in team meetings. They should be able to confidently answer any question posed by the prospective patient. Upon hiring front office staff, it is important that they are given an overview of dental procedures and dental services that are offered by the practice.

In addition to the above, when speaking to your potential patient, get into the habit of taking notes. With the influx of calls you receive in a day and with everything else that happens in between it can become difficult to remember details about every call. Take down their name, number, reason for calling and what the follow up is. A trick to create a connection between the patient and the practice is to repeat their name at some point in the conversation or just before you end the call.

You play a considerable role in growing your dental practice – every call you take is an opportunity to request them to make an appointment, whether it is an enquiry about a cleaning prices, teeth whitening or a toothache. With more extensive treatment it is often difficult to quote over the phone- more need for you to book them a consultation. If it is an existing patient, quickly check when last they have been in for a check up and schedule an appointment for them.

Face to face etiquette with a customer

Face to face interactions play a considerable role in a receptionist's day-to-day activities and it is important that you create a great first impression when dealing with patients. The first thing you should do is greet the patient with a warm smile. Eye contact is also very important as it indicates that you are attentive and listening to the patient. It is also a great way to show you acknowledge their presence if you are on the phone. While it is not necessary, offering refreshments to the patient while they wait can help the wait seem shorter. If there are any delays, the patient should be informed about it and if it is a significant delay, they should be given the opportunity to reschedule their appointment.

One scenario that you are most likely to face is the following: The phone rings as the patient comes out of their treatment and is eager to leave. You still need to take their payment and book their follow up appointment. What do you do? You politely tell the patient in front of you that the call quickly needs to be answered to take a message. You can say something along the lines of, "Excuse me Mrs Taylor, I just need to answer this call quickly and take a message. Thank you for your patience." Regarding the caller, be sure to inform them that their call is important, and you want to give them your undivided attention however you have a patient in front of you. Ask them which the best number and the most convenient time is to call them back. Always make sure that you call them when you say you will. This instills a sense of reliability and it indicates that you respect their time.



Another scenario that you could face is that of an angry customer. While most patients are pleasant and easy to interact with, there will always be a few that will come in aggravated and anxious. Although not an everyday occurrence, it is not uncommon for a patient to come into the practice who is upset. Unfortunately, being the first point of contact means that the receptionist will have to deal with the grievance. This may prove challenging and it is important that front office staff is equipped to handle such a scenario. It is important that you are able to calm the customer down by using phrases such as, "I'm sorry this has happened to you" or "let me see how I can resolve this for you". Inform the customer that the practice cares about them and you are working on resolving the issue. However, do not make false promises and be sure to ask for help when necessary.

Etiquette in Electronic Communication

With dental practice websites on the increase more and more patients are choosing to correspond via e-mail. This in turn means that the receptionist has to be able to effectively and timeously communicate by e-mail to patients. Like phone and face to face etiquette, e-mail etiquette also exists. When writing an e-mail start with "Dear, "Mr." or "Mrs.". Starting an e-mail with "Hey" for example is too casual. When closing an e-mail end with "Kind regards" or "Sincerely". A vital part of front desk etiquette is for customers to know that their needs are important to the practice. Again, make sure that e-mails are responded to in an efficient and professional manner.

CONCLUSION

Being the first point of contact at any dental practice plays a major role in the overall success of the establishment. Maintaining good etiquette and acting in a way that is professional will go a long way in fulfilling your patient's need and improving their overall satisfaction. This in turn will result in returning patients as well as converting prospective patients into patients of your practice.

REFERENCES

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QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by etiquette?
 - a. Acting in a way according to your mood everyday
 - b. An acceptable way to conduct yourself in a situation
 - c. Saying yes to everything

2. What should you do before answering a call?
 - a. Wait until the last ring to answer
 - b. Maintain good posture and smile
 - c. Make sure to tell the caller they are interrupting you

3. What should you do when the phone rings while you are busy with a patient?
 - a. Ignore the phone and carry on with the task in front of you
 - b. Answer the call and leave the patient in front of you waiting
 - c. Politely explain to the patient in front of you that you need to answer the call and take a message

4. In which way can you help establish a connection between yourself and a potential patient?
 - a. Tell them your personal history
 - b. Repeat their name in conversation or just before you hang up
 - c. Talk to them as if you were talking to your friend

5. What is the first thing you do when a patient walks into the practice?
 - a. Judge their appearance and clothes
 - b. Ignore them and wait for them to come to you
 - c. Greet them with them a warm and friendly smile

6. When writing an e-mail how would you address the patient?
 - a. Dear Mr. Jacobs
 - b. Hi my friend!
 - c. Hey there.

7. What should you do if there are delays with the patient's appointment?
 - a. Do not tell the patient
 - b. Tell the dentist to speed up
 - c. Inform the patient and if a significant delay, offer them the option to reschedule

8. It is important that the receptionist is well versed in the happenings of the practice and should be included in team meetings.
 - a. True
 - b. False

9. When speaking to a potential patient over the phone what can you do to make sure you get all of the information?
 - a. Get into the habit of taking notes
 - b. Try to remember everything
 - c. Getting the necessary information is not important

10. Which is an acceptable way to answer a call?

- a. Welcome to XY Dentistry, you are speaking to Angie, how can I help you?
- b. Hello
- c. Yes, how can I help you

1. Link to questions:

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1 CPD point will be awarded for passing the questionnaire

Pass mark of 70% required

Register via the link with your name, surname, email address and HPCSA number.