

The Root of the Empty Chair

It's Monday, the busiest day of the week for many U.S. dental practices. You have a full staff ready to go and a packed schedule. By lunchtime, one patient has failed to show up for a morning hygiene appointment and the restoration for which you've booked out the majority of your afternoon cancels with just 30 minutes notice and no explanation.

Of course, the reasons don't matter, do they? The bottom line is, with little to no notice you have empty chairs and an idle staff who must be paid. If you feel frustrated, you're not alone. A recent survey reports that 1 in 10 dental appointments is a no-show (a 10% revenue loss). And that's baseline. Cancellation rates run as high as 30%.

CALL THEM IRRESPONSIBLE

Many offices look to behavior-related strategies – missed-appointment fees and zero-tolerance policies – to reduce cancellations. But is that really the best approach?

Patients cancel or miss appointments for any number of reasons: dental fear and anxiety, financial stress, lack

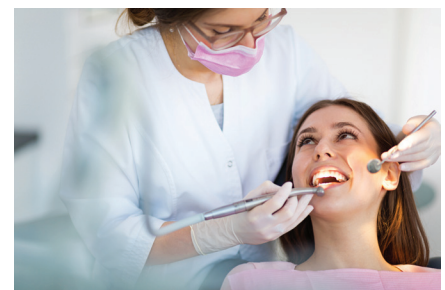


of transportation or personal emergencies. It's a rare person who just doesn't care, or who relishes inconveniencing you and your staff.

And keep in mind that cancellations aren't the sole responsibility of the patient. Take a look at how you and your staff interact with patients. Are you taking the steps to build strong patient relationships that might actually discourage missed appointments?

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Deepening patient relationships



and improving the patient journey are key to a productive practice. But how exactly do you go about that? It's less about filling up your schedule than it is about focusing



Recent Statistics from the Pew Research Center on Texting vs Calling

- 33% of adults (77% of 18 to 22 year olds) prefer texts over all forms of communication (including in person)
- One-third of all adults prefer text to phone calls
- Text is the most used form of communication for adults under age 50
- Americans send 5x as many texts as compared to phone calls each day
- Daily average smartphone usage is 4.9 hours.

Source:
www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/clear-communication/201706/are-you-hiding-behind-your-texts

on the things that improve patients' experiences, which begin when they make an appointment and continue when they walk in the door and are greeted by your front office staff, and when they enter the treatment room and interact with hygienists, assistants, associates and you.

But it doesn't stop there — what's the experience at check-out and between appointments? Each step of the way, you and your team

have opportunities to connect with patients in meaningful ways that make it less likely they will cancel future appointments.

IT'S A TEAM SPORT

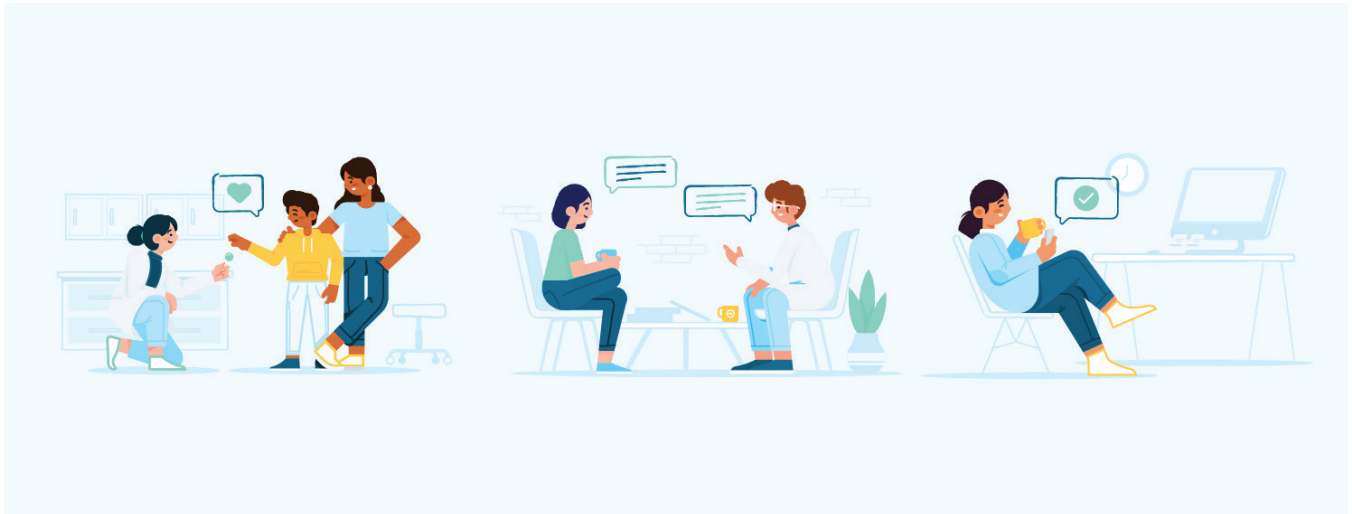
Successful dentistry is about clinical skills, but it's also about the team with which you surround yourself. Hiring the right people for each position in the office and providing them with the tools they need – from equipment, instruments and materials to training and education – will help you create a practice

that warmly welcomes patients on their first visit, treats them with respect during appointments and reaches out to them between visits.

Set the tone. As the dentist in the practice, you set the tone for the whole staff. When hiring team members, carefully explain your approach to patient engagement and your expectations for high-level care and patient interactions. Also, do as you say. Treat your staff with respect, acknowledge their accomplishments and gently guide them when you see opportunities for improvement.

Pay attention. One bad encounter with a team member can send a patient running, so pay attention to how your staff interacts with patients. Is your front office staff warm and friendly, both when face-to-face with patients and when speaking with them on the phone? Do you see patients and hygienists chatting about their weekends before they get down to the business of a prophylaxis treatment? Are assistants providing thoughtful treatment explanations that keep patients' attention?

These are the interactions that make patients feel like members of your dental family, but you have to be on the lookout for them and act swiftly if you see interactions that might spell trouble. Is someone at the front desk speaking impatiently to a patient? Did you just hear a hygienist reprimand a patient for not flossing? Is an associate not making eye contact with a patient when explaining treatment options?



Publicly call out the positive interactions so that everyone on the team is aware of the value you place on them. Privately discuss the negative interactions so you can help guide team members to improve.

Don't be afraid to make a change.

Sometimes, a team member just isn't the right person for your practice. If, after training, guidance and discussion, you have a team member who isn't able to welcome patients warmly, interact with them professionally or live up to your standards in some way, you can't be afraid to make a change. Having the right person in each position is critical to the patient experience and your practice success.

MEET PATIENTS WHERE THEY ARE

You may have all of the right people on your team, and they may all be performing at the highest level, but some patients will come into your practice with fears and concerns that even the friendliest front staff member can't

alleviate. These are the patients who may cancel at the last minute and leave you with an empty chair. How do you ensure they're cared for in a way that encourages them to keep appointments?

Start by meeting these patients where they are. Acknowledge their anxiety as real and show compassion. If you know ahead of time that a fearful patient is coming in, alert your staff. You don't want team members to draw attention to the patient's concerns, but you do want them to be thoughtful in their approach to the patient.

Also consider investing in some technologies that can alleviate

patient fear. When you can offer sedation dentistry or anxiety-reduction virtual reality tools, patients have concrete evidence that you care about their experience.

DON'T GO IT ALONE

You support your team members in their efforts to build positive patient relationships, but who supports you and your practice?

You've been a patient yourself, so you know that sometimes it's the little things – beyond the relationships you forge with care providers – that can make a difference at each appointment. What makes your life easier, and reduces the stress of medical and



dental appointments? Do you prefer text or pop-up reminders over phone calls? Is streamlined processing (online forms) easier than juggling clipboards and paper forms in a crowded waiting room? Do you like getting your treatment taken care of with fewer appointments? A safe assumption is that you answered yes to each of those questions. But how do you make all of that a reality in your practice?

Don't try to figure it out on your own. Find a partner who can provide solutions that will meet your individual practice needs. For example, Patterson Dental's Revolve software portfolio includes practice management and analytics tools and patient engagement

and experience options, such as RevenueWell, OperaDDS, and OperaVR. Patterson Revolve Software Solutions also includes a team of experts who can provide advice, training and support.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Your ultimate goal is excellent patient care, but you can't achieve that without a strong dental practice. That strength comes

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from your expert clinical skills and knowledge, your team members and the guidance you provide to them and the professional support you receive from businesses with whom you partner.

In the end, all of these elements add up to a patient experience that ensures patients walk in the door in the first place and keeps them coming back. **BP**