



Sheila Scott is an independent Business Consultant who has been working with practices for 18 years; helping hundreds convert successfully and helping private practices improve effectiveness and profit. Here she shares her vast experience with you with some great tips and sound advice. See www.sheila-scott.co.uk for more details.

KEY DETERMINANTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CONVERSION

1. RESPOND TO YOUR CUSTOMERS' NEEDS

Over the last 18 years, I've been insisting that practices undertake patient questionnaires to find out both what it is that patients want from practices, and what they think of the service so far. The results do vary from practice to practice, but in 90% of practices 'treatments to improve the health of teeth and gums' is right at the top of the list of aspects that patients tell us are 'very important' to them (and in the remaining 10% it's not far behind!). This compares with an average 40-60% of patients who tell us 'treatments to improve appearance of teeth and gums' is very important to them. So however you want your practice to change when you convert, getting the health message across to all patients is vital in explaining why it is better to be a private (plan) patient.

However, every practice will have patients who have a different list of 'needs' from their practice – and the practices that know what their particular patients want, and work out how they can respond to patient needs, end up with more appreciative patients, willing to pay high fees for what they understand is an excellent standard of dental care and service. These practices are more successful at conversion time and beyond.

2. CLARIFY VALUE

Most practices give 'more time' to patients after conversion – but do you tell patients what are you using the additional time for and how this benefits the patient? Remember that most patients want 'health' first.

It's not that health hasn't been a feature of the NHS – it's just that in the private practice more time and attention can be given to helping patients preserve the health of their teeth and gums. They can have more time with their dentist having dental health assessed and explained to them, as well as their options for preserving health into later life. They can have more time with their hygienist who works with them to control the factors that cause loss of health. If they can keep healthy mouths, of course, they're not going to have the same risks of future problems, treatments, tooth loss and having to pay for restorative treatment!

Please don't expect your patients to pick up this message by osmosis – you have to tell them this is what you give them, and tell them clearly. You have to prove that you spend your time on prevention...and tell them how they'll benefit. And they have to feel the difference. How do you make sure of that?

3. GET YOUR PRICES RIGHT...FIRST TIME

It's important that you only convert once! And that your fees are entirely based on what it costs to provide the standard of care and service that you feel is right for your patients.

See 'Fees First' article opposite for how to work out fees – but do discuss where they come from with the team, so they have confidence in the new fees when questioned by patients.

4. DEVELOP YOUR SKILLS...CONSTANTLY

Good people skills are essential to a smooth conversion – and that means within the team as well as with the patients! A successful conversion needs an inspiring and nurturing leader and caring, well-prepared team members throughout the practice. Pay attention to real care and communications.

5. PRACTISE, PRACTISE, PRACTISE

You can never do too much preparation for a conversion. The better informed the team are in the conversion, such as what will happen after the conversion, the difference between NHS and private care and the better rehearsed they are in answering patient questions, the easier the patients will find the change. Regular team planning meetings are essential, as well as practise in guiding patients through the practice, and their decisions.

Conversion is the biggest change you're likely to go through in your practising career – make sure you do it well, and remember it's a team game!

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