

Upping the game

Reports from many Irish practices are indicating that footsteps are less frequent in the foyers; patients are increasing the time between routine appointments, putting off treatments and cancelling hygienist appointments.

It's hard to stay positive and happy if this is happening to you – but it's essential to avoid any air of gloom that can permeate and gnaw away at a practice's success. I've discovered a little bit of 'dental depression' creeping into some practices, and there's nothing like predicting a bit of disaster to allow just that to start to happen.

There are still patients out there who have some money to spend on quality care; there are new patients joining practices; and patients who would never leave their existing practices. The best practices are still attracting and keeping these.

Your best chance of surviving and prospering in the recession is to look hard at what you have, and what you can

Sheila Scott on how to keep your practice busy and buoyant in the recession

achieve despite a few cancelled treatment plans. You have to be even more serious about keeping your patients happy, appreciative and committed; you have to 'up' your game in terms of delivering care and value to every single patient in your practice.

Specifically....

- Pay attention to the premises and frontage – are these clean and tidy; does the practice look prosperous or down at heel?
- Make sure the patient journey through the practice is comfortable and subtly guided at every turn.
- Pay attention to the little details of human interaction and conversation.

But importantly, resolve to be a 'best' practice, and:

- Pay attention to how dentists and hygienists deliver their best professional advice to maximum effect.

I've always contended that buying dentistry is a little like buying a pair of shoes inside a black plastic bag. Patients don't know what dentists are doing for them or how to judge the quality of the work; they are totally dependent on what they see and hear in order to assess

the value and quality of the care they receive in a practice.

If you want your care to remain a priority when money gets tight you need to address all of the following:

1. Meet patients' needs

Take steps to understand what it is that patients really want from their dental practice. Patients want to trust their dental team, as well as getting help and advice to prevent and avoid dental treatment. This has wide-ranging implications for how care is communicated – and delivered to patients.

2. Focus on dental health...

Change the focus of the practice away from treatment, and back to the most important appointment of all – the one where dental health is assessed, and steps to improve dental health are identified. Talk about treatments to 'return patients to dental health' and give positive reports on 'healthy' structures.

3. ...not treatment needs

Start showing patients the depth and breadth and importance of the exam appointment – it's so much more than 'a quick look at the teeth to look for holes'. If patients are allowed to believe that the purpose of visiting the dentist is to find a problem that

needs fixing...then they'll only visit when they believe they have one.

4. Watch your language

Resolve to stop using jargon, and start communicating with patients about what you are doing. Don't just shout dental abbreviations at your nurse – tell your patient in everyday language what you're finding and recommending – and give a positive report regarding what you'd previously have deemed too normal/healthy to comment on.


Do tell patients what you're hoping to achieve for them (less treatment for them when they're 20 years older perhaps?) and what you're doing to their teeth when you're treating them – how your meticulousness now improves the life of the restoration, for example.

5. Give good reasons for hygiene visits

Make sure you support your referral to your hygienist, and you tell your patients exactly what they can expect from their appointment(s). Surely the most important part of the hygiene appointment is the advice on the skills and techniques and tools patients can use to maintain mouth health and prevent future problems? Your hygienist can surely help patients save themselves from future treatment – an incredibly attractive proposition in a recession.

6. Programmes

Develop plans and programmes designed to keep patients healthy and problem-free for the duration of this recession and beyond. Identify how you



“Your best chance of surviving and prospering in the recession is to look hard at what you have, and what you can achieve”

can specifically help children develop good skills and habits for dental health for example, or focus on young adults, who are now more at risk of oral cancer than ever before, or on those who have medical complications or increased risks of general health damage if gum problems are rife.

Then shamelessly promote these programmes through your own patients ('We're focusing on diabetic patients at the moment, can you give this advice leaflet to anybody else you know who is...?') or local medical or health practitioner contacts.

7. Cosmetic opportunities

Get your marketing of cosmetic dentistry right and put it in its rightful place. The patient's feelings about their dental appearance is part of the exam. It's neither an attack on their fragile self-esteem nor a hard

sell. So ditch any 'dental menus' and hard sell appearance questions on your medical history forms and start asking one extra general question during every exam: 'Are you happy with the appearance of your teeth and gums?'

If you've never done this before, you'll be amazed at how many lovely smiley people want a little cosmetic enhancement, and how many you talk out of destructive ideas. If a few patients complain, explain that this question is part of your full regular assessment, as more patients are getting interested in this side of things, and you need to guide those who are thinking of cosmetic dentistry into making decisions that are also good for their dental health.

8. Take sterilisation out of the closet

Always be aware that your patients are desperate for every

reassurance that you are meticulous at protecting them from cross infection.

So stop hiding your sterilisation routines. Do talk about 'sterile probes and mirrors' and 'going through to the steriliser'. Don't let patients think the glass of chairside mouthwash was the last patient's - only fill this cup once the patient is in situ. (You wouldn't accept a gin and tonic that had been sitting around for a while, so why should your patients accept mouthwash that isn't fresh?)

9. Absolute cleanliness

Clean the practice. Thoroughly. Every day. Remember that one little grubby handprint on the wall, or one smear on the mirror, or one bit of dust in the toilets can totally reduce patient confidence and ruin the whole effect of even the shiniest new surgery, high-tech

environment and space age decontamination unit.

10. Believe in teamwork

Do get your team involved in refocusing the practice so patients experience superb service and the best dental advice to keep them healthy. Maintain an air of excellence and enthusiasm. Work on improving your language and your patient's ability to judge you favourably. But do it as a team and work together. ■



Sheila Scott (sheila-scott.co.uk) is a dental business consultant who has supported many dentists and their teams to 'up' their game, improve patient loyalty and enhance patient spend. Sheila will be speaking at the next Dentistry Show to be held at the NEC Birmingham on 4-5 March 2011. For further information, visit www.thedentistryshow.co.uk

The face of dentistry is changing... will you be there to benefit?

The Dentistry Show 2011 is a world class two day action packed clinical and business conference and major exhibition for Dental professionals. With over 55 speakers, 5 conference streams and more than 200 suppliers on the adjoining exhibition floor there really is plenty for you to listen to, learn from and to take home and put into practice!

Also back for 2011, the UK's first Live Theatre will once again host live demonstrations showcasing the latest technology and cosmetic dental procedures.

Even bigger and better for 2011

Register today and access:

- Five events in one - something for the whole team
- World-class clinical and business conferences
- Excellent value CPD (1+55 hours)
- Live interactive theatre with demonstrations
- Insight into the latest products and procedures



Visit www.thedentistryshow.co.uk/register-idm quoting promotional code IDMA1 or call us on 01926 485 151 TODAY!

