

How to get and retain that valuable patient

Patients visit the dentist for many reasons; we can narrow them down to four categories: pain alleviation, hygiene, cosmetic or replacement. Dentists can create the most value for patients by alleviating the pain however; it is likely that the practice is built on hygiene, cosmetic dentistry or replacement.

How do dentists create value for patients? What drives one person may not be a motivator for another, people perceive value primarily for one of four reasons; Time, image, risk, investment return, education or interpersonal skills.

Time is a valuable commodity that often is overlooked. Simply by paying more attention to what matters most to the patient usually will make dental appointments more effective. In today's chaotic world, many people are pressed for time and saving time is a crucial value. When treating this type of patient, dentists and staff must respect this appointment; if changes are necessary, it is important to explain why. When talking with such patients about needed treatment of certain procedures, dentists should explain how this will save them time, as well as time in the future.

For patients who are motivated by image, it is important for dentists to explain their credentials and how significant they are. Dentists and staff need to tell patients about the products they will use and why they are preferred from others. In addition, it is important for dentist to focus on how the procedure will boost the patient's self-image.

The perception of risk is the foundation for all decision making. A patient who perceives too much risk is not likely to go through with treatment. Loading up patients with brochures and facts may elevate their anxiety, not ease it. Dentists should take the time to talk with patients about proposed treatment plans. They should ease the patient by letting them know that many patients have had similar concerns. It is equally important to discuss the number of procedures they have performed successfully.

A patient who values return on investment justifies decisions on the basis of a logical cost/benefit analysis. The patient wants to know what the investment will be for any given treatment. If they perceive the benefits to exceed the investment, they probably will proceed with the treatment. It is imperative for the dentist to discuss with the patient the costs of alternative procedures, failure rates of different alternative procedures and the nonfinancial rewards.

Dentists need to combine education with interpersonal skills to build dependable patients. In fact dentists may be their own worst enemies if they fail to demonstrate to their patients how competent they are. Not only is the patient judging the dentist's clinical skills, but also judging the dentist's interpersonal skills. Dentists need to combine educational skills with interpersonal skills to maintain a loyal base of patients who will then refer others to the practice. It is important for dentists to know how they create value and to communicate this to patients. Because the financial aspect of the relationship often is driven by insurance, dentists cannot allow insurance reimbursement to drive their practice. They also cannot keep away from the reality that insurance creates. Insurance reimbursement is low, and they will not cover many of the treatment options that dentists would like to perform. Understanding how dentists create value starts with a firm understanding of how patients perceive value. Dentists need to communicate with patients in a language they identify with. If they leave this process to chance, dentists risk letting patients walk away because they have failed to understand their needs.

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