

GIFT OF THE GAP

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Introduction

In dentistry, much of your success depends on what you do the quality of your treatment, how well you accommodate patients or how many services you offer. But what many dentists fail to realize is that there is also significant power in what you say. When it comes to their dental care, human beings are hesitant, skeptical, lazy and sometimes flat out irrational. That means that choosing the right words to describe your practice and your treatment is crucial if you want to keep them from slipping into avoidance and procrastination.

For The First Appointment/New Patients

If your marketing is working, you hopefully get plenty of calls from new potential patients in need of your care. A phone call is not the same as an appointment, and it's all too easy for a caller to change their mind, cancel the appointment or simply not show up. The way your team handles the first call and the first visit can make all the difference. It should go without saying that the person answering the phone should be warm, polite and helpful. Remember, first impressions are lasting and patients need to feel immediately at ease. The best way to greet a new caller is, "wishes sir/mam, _____ Dental clinic, this is Connie. I can help you." Notice I didn't say "Can I help you?" This slight alteration changes the conversation from a request for information to a simple, welcoming statement "I can help you" Subtle, but powerful. There are few busy practices that answer the phone and immediately ask the caller to hold. Don't. Make sure everyone in your office knows that the first conversation with a new patient is their top priority. Many times, a first-time caller will immediately start asking questions about money. Why? It's often all they know to ask. They can't judge your clinical skills over the phone so they ask about something they can assess: cost. The secret is to acknowledge their concerns without dwelling on the money. After all, until the dentist actually see patient's teeth, there's no way one could accurately quote how much they may need to spend. Instead have your front desk staff say, "Our fees are very reasonable. Based on what you've told me, the dentist would be very concerned about what's going on in your mouth. Once he sees you, he can figure out what needs to be done and you have our promise that we'll discuss it with you and won't begin any treatment without getting your approval first. Can you come in this afternoon at 2, or is 4 o'clock better for you?". I also recommend offering a free or low-cost first exam. This helps your potential patient feel comfortable that you're not trying to take advantage of them without forcing you to give them a rough estimate of fees that may only scare them off.

One of the biggest new patient challenges is no-shows, but this simple trick can help. At the end of every day, the doctor should call every first-time patient. All you have to say is, "Hi, this is Doctor _____ and I just wanted to personally welcome you to our practice. When you're a patient of ours, you're like family, so if you have any questions for me ahead of time I'd be happy to answer them." This doesn't take much time out of your day, but in my experience it dramatically reduces the number of no-shows (if not completely eliminating them). Just try it out for a few weeks and see the results.

Current Patients

Of course once a patient is in your chair, the goal is to get them to accept treatment. Whether they do or not often depends on how you present their case. When faced with a neglected mouth, many dentists feel the need to list all the care a patient will ultimately need. I encourage you to resist this impulse. When a patient has put off dental care, it is often because they thought it was either unnecessary or too expensive. Either way, expounding on all the extensive care they need on the first visit is a good way to ensure they don't return. Instead, speak first to their immediate

need the reason they came in. I suggest saying something like, "I understand you're having some pain in your tooth. Do you want to just take care of what's necessary right now or would you like to talk about more comprehensive care?" Most patients will at least be curious enough to ask about comprehensive care. But this lets them know treatment can be done in stages, gives them a choice and allows you to paint a picture of their optimal health in an unobtrusive way. You don't need to discuss cost at this point. Remember, you're just trying to get them to understand what an ideal smile could mean for them (and that you are here to help when they're ready).

The choice of words when talking to your patients is particularly important. One of the most powerful words to use is "yet" as in, "I understand you're grinding your teeth. Are you having headaches yet?" This simple word creates a sense of urgency and sheds light on the potential consequences of procrastination. I suggest using it often.

Another word to remember is "upgrade." Whether you're explaining the difference between implants and dentures or composite fillings versus porcelain, offering patients an upgrade gets them interested in at least hearing the benefits. For example, "We can do a composite restoration for that tooth, and it will last several years and look similar to the natural tooth. However, we do offer an upgrade to the treatment, which is a CEREC® restoration made with real porcelain. It will last much longer and match your other teeth perfectly. This upgrade will cost a bit more, but we can do it more quickly and in a single visit." It's a great word and people generally will look at their budget to see if they can afford the upgrade.

Future Referrals

This may be the most overlooked opportunity in dentistry. Everyone wants their patients to recommend them but the best way to make sure they do is to ask. Some dentists may worry that this communicates the wrong message and makes them look desperate for patients, but it won't if you do it the right way. Try saying, "If you're happy with the care we've given you, we'd love to offer that same care to your friends and family if the need arises. Please feel free to recommend us to them." Believe it or not, many patients assume that their dentist office works like their medical doctor and they may not know you accept new patients. This tells them you're always happy to see new faces and invites them to spread the word.

Make certain your patients also know how much you can do for them. Along with the newsletters and e-mails you hopefully send as part of your internal marketing, mention your various services to patients in your office. Even if they're not interested in Invisalign or implants, they may know someone who is. Make it a habit to talk about all you have to offer and you may be surprised at who listens. Finally, make sure to thank any patient who refers you a new case. A handwritten note, a gift card, even a discount on a future service is well worth it if someone brought a new patient into your practice. Of course you shouldn't tell your patients that you will reward them for referrals, but a sincere "thank you" is a great way to show your appreciation and build great patient loyalty.

Conclusion

A successful dentist speak to his patients in a way that makes them feel welcome, inspires confidence in the dental team and encourages them to refer their friends and family. And I've seen those who inadvertently turn patients off on the first phone call or scare them away after the first examination. The key is understanding that your words always have an effect and that taking some time to perfect them can add up to huge success for your practice.