The Road Map to Customer Service

By Dr. Ehab Heikal, Egypt

Good customer service is the lifeblood of any business. You can offer promotions and slash prices to bring in as many new customers as you want, but unless you can get some of those customers to come back, your business won’t be profitable for long.

Good customer service is all about bringing customers back. And about sending them away happy – happy enough to pass positive feedback about your business along to others, who may then try the product or service you offer for themselves and in their turn become repeat customers.

If you’re a good dentist with good selling capabilities (able to sell your service well), then you can sell any service to anyone once. But it will be your approach to customer service that determines whether or not you’ll ever be able to sell that person anything else. The essence of good customer service is forming a relationship with customers – a relationship that that individual customer feels that he would like to pursue.

How do you go about forming such a relationship? By remembering the one true secret of good customer service and acting accordingly: “you will be judged by what you do, not what you say.”

If you truly want to have good customer service, all you have to do is ensure that your business consistently does these things:

1) Answer your phone. Get call forwarding, or a proper answering machine. Hire the right staff to answer your calls. But make sure that someone is picking up the phone when someone calls your business. (Notice I say “someone”. People who call want to talk to a live person, not a “fake recorded robot”).

2) Don’t make promises unless you WILL keep them. Not plan to keep them. Reliability is one of the keys to any good relationship, and good customer service is no exception. If you say, “Your new denture will be delivered on Tuesday”, make sure it is delivered on Tuesday. Otherwise, don’t say it. The same rule applies to client appointments, deadlines, etc. Think before you give any promise – because nothing annoys customers more than a broken one.

And above all, DON’T over promise. Overwhelming customers will lead to disappointment if your service was delivered at a slightly lower level than promised. Even though customers might have expected less than reality, yet your promises increased their level of expectations. (See the chapter Quality & Standardization in the dental Office in my earlier book B&K for the Dental Profession, Second edition).

3) Listen to your customers. Is there anything more exasperating than telling someone what you want or what your problem is and then discovering that that person hasn’t been paying attention and needs to have it explained again? From a customer’s point of view, I doubt it. Let your customer talk and show them that you are listening by making the appropriate responses, such as suggesting how to solve the problem.

4) Deal with complaints. No one likes hearing complaints, and many of us have developed a reflex shrug, saying, “You can’t please all the people all the time”. Maybe not, but if you give the complaint your attention, you may be able to please this one person this one time – and position your business to reap the benefits of good customer service.

5) Be helpful – even if there’s no immediate profit in it. Upon my request, my travel agent arranged a limo to pick me up from the airport. Upon arrival, the driver did not have any receipts. He promised to send me one the following day. No one showed up. I called the travel agent asking them for the limo agency number. Only to discover that the travel agent gave me the number of a different limo agency. However, the manager asked how could he help me, I explained the situation. Although it wasn’t his problem, yet he offered to send me a receipt. And he did. I have been their customer now for seven years. Not to mention how many new customers they have through me!

6) Train your staff to be ALWAYS helpful, courteous, and knowledgeable. Do it yourself or hire someone to train them. Talk to them about customer service and what it is (and isn’t) regularly. Most importantly, give every member of your staff enough information and power to make those small customer pleasing decisions, so he never has to say, “I don’t know, but so-and-so will be back at...”

7) Take the extra step. For instance, if someone walks into your clinic and asks you to help them find a good orthodontist or Psychiatrist for example, don’t just say, “Dr. X.” Lead the customer to him, give him a phone number or address or even call Dr. X if you know him. Better yet, wait and see if he has questions about it, or further needs. Whatever the extra step may be, if you want to provide good customer service, take it. They may not say so to you, but people notice when people make an extra effort and will tell other people.

8) Throw in something extra. Whether it’s a free follow up, a coupon for a future discount, additional information on how to use the water pick, or a genuine smile, people love to get more than they thought they were getting. And don’t think that a gesture has to be large to be effective. A small thing, could be so appreciated.

If you apply these eight simple rules consistently, your business will become known for its good customer service. And the best part? The irony of good customer service is that over time it will bring in more new customers than promotions and price slashing ever did!

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What do patients want?

By Fiona Stuart-Wilson, UK

Very often when planning our practice's services, we take as a starting point what we would like to offer our patients and even the level of service that we would like to receive ourselves if we were patients. After all patients have certain expectations and requirements which must be met if they are at least going to be satisfied, let alone delighted, with their experience. So perhaps reflecting on what would give us satisfaction is no bad place to start. But should it stop there? If we are at least going to be satisfied, let alone delighted, with their experience. So perhaps reflect on what would give us satisfaction is no bad place to start.

Key priorities that tend to be identified by patients in surveys include - unsurprisingly - the cleanliness of practices, the knowledge and technical ability of staff, and treatment outcomes. However patients also identify that the way they are treated plays an important part in forming their view of a practice, so customer service and communication skills play a critical role in a patient's decision to return to a dentist.

Research from the US on patient requirements also makes for interesting reading and can help us reflect on how we in our own practices measure up. Here are some of the key highlights of recent findings of what patients thought important:

- High standards of sterilization, cross-infection control and general cleanliness
- Your sterilization and cross-infection procedures might be perfect but patients notice all aspects of a practice. If the bathroom is not scrupulously clean or the reception desk is grubby and cluttered, patients will have misgivings about your standards of cleanliness generally.
- Patient-facing staff need to see themselves as hosts welcoming patients to the practice, and communicate and behave accordingly.

Post-treatment telephone contact

These appear to be important to patient satisfaction levels and there is some evidence to suggest that patients are more likely to stay with a dentist who telephone calls them after treatment themselves, rather than a dentist who delegates this to a member of staff.

The quality of smiles in the practice

Are you and your staff a good advertisement for dentistry and indeed your own work? Patients look at the smiles that they see around them in the practice, and may view that as evidence of the quality of care you provide.

Convenient practice opening hours

Location and opening hours are crucial in to patients' levels of satisfaction. If your practice is not the most convenient location do make sure that you communicate to patients the positives, the easiest way of getting to the practice etc. and the convenience of your opening hours for both treatment and for appointment making and information.

A fast new-patient appointment

The length of time it takes to get a new patient appointment can be crucial to the patients buying decision. It is suggested that if this is more than 2 days, patients may choose to look elsewhere.

Running to time

This is a perennial issue in many practices but it still seems to be really important in a patient's view of a dentist and whether they are satisfied or not with their care. If you regularly overrun and see patients after their appointment time, for whatever good reason, your patient may see this as a lack of respect for their time.

Well-explained treatment plans and financial options

Patients appreciate having treatment plans explained to them in terms they can understand and a clear discussion of the costs involved. Many patients still view dentistry as expensive and need to feel comfortable with the investment they are making. In addition, there is some evidence from the US that patients want more than one financial option to consider, rather than to feel satisfied with the experience they have had.

In reflecting on these points you may feel that you are doing all of these things. But times change and patients become more demanding. At the heart of your reflection should be seeing things from your patients' point of view. Exactly what is it like to be a patient in your practice? What is the real patient experience, as opposed to the one you would like patients to have? And is there anything you need to change?