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Practice Management Articles



Dental Practice
 Management Solutions

Charm Offensive

- Lisa Philp, TGNA

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DENTAL DEMOGRAPHICS are changing almost faster than we can keep up: The Baby Boomers are retiring and the archaic system of employer-provided benefits is looking more long in the tooth than ever. As such, smart dentists are reconfiguring their practices around a choice-based, consumerist mentality.

Think of it from a customer-relations standpoint: To an unprecedented degree, dentists (and their team) must now be expert communicators, mastering both the verbal and nonverbal skills that will improve interaction with patients — and keep them coming back. Patient trust, of which good communication is the foundation stone, is repaid in loyalty, respect and more frequent case acceptance.

Intriguingly, studies show that interpersonal communication is received just 10 percent through words and 30 percent tone of voice. The balance, a startling 60 percent, comes through body language. That means making a good first impression with a new or prospective patient is more critical than ever. Those same studies have shown that people make snap judgments of others — not always well-founded ones, admittedly, as we all know — within three to four minutes of meeting them.

So, tone of voice and body language are joined here by our clothes, our personal hygiene, our overall appearance. Keeping in mind the need to respect any cultural or tribal customs regarding tattoos and piercings, it's therefore incumbent upon you to make your practice's "image policy" clear: uniforms, hair, makeup, jewelry, shoes, visible tattoos or piercings. The particulars are, of course, up to you, but they need to be consistent with the type of culture you want to present and the kinds of patients you want to retain —and it's never bad to err on the conservative side.

TIP: what's the law in Nova Scotia on tattoos and piercings in the workplace?

<http://www.stewartmckelvey.com/en/home/resources/publications/cananemployerprohibitattoosandpiercings.aspx>

That all-important body language, meanwhile, starts with good eye contact and openness. Does your practice have tall, bunker-style desks in the reception area? They're good for employee privacy but can be daunting to patients. Be sure your front-office crew stands up to greet arriving patients.

Likewise, don't be too casual with your interactions; even offhand conversations about treatments should occur in a consult room, not the reception area or hallways.

As for the operatory, eye-to-eye communication is, by definition, a little trickier when a patient is lying in the dental chair. So whenever you're discussing overall oral health, charting or looking at photos or radiographs —and especially when you're presenting a treatment plan — have the patient sit up. It'll establish more equal footing and keep the patient from feeling (literally) talked down to.

Even your posture matters: Like Mom always said, stand up straight, and keep your shoulders back and arms open (not crossed) — a position that says you're open to calm, informative dialogue. Finally, you're a dentist. So smile, frequently, when it is appropriate to smile. Dentistry, now more than ever, is a people business — and people increasingly have the option to take their business elsewhere. We live in a customer-centric world, after all, and even the most subtle communication cues can make all the difference between a practice that's flailing and one that's sailing.

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