

Customer care

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Everyone who is in business knows that the most important thing one can achieve is attracting and retaining customers. Now, before the *BDJ* is bombarded with complaints about ivory-tower academics talking theoretically about something of which they have no experience, I need to tell you that I do have real, live practical experience of business. Okay, it's not a business to do with dentistry, it's a business to do with horses, but nevertheless, it is a business and the basic premises of businesses apply to both dentistry and to riding stables. Remarkably also, there are a number of interesting analogies between running a riding school and running a dental practice!

The analogies between the two types of business are as follows. Firstly, many of the customers are anxious (some in the extreme) when they arrive. Secondly, both businesses have the potential (although it is never the intention) to cause the patients/clients pain. Thirdly, both businesses exude an air of slight mystique. It seems to customers that the

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grasped and used the principles of neuro-linguistic programming in order to ensure that they can build and maintain a happy patient base, who will turn up, brush up and pay up!

Actually it is probably all much more simple than these 'techniques' would lead us to believe.

There are only four basic emotions and all behaviours, including what we say, are governed by these four basic emotions.

Patients who turn up when they should, are relaxed and will pay without hassle, are in one of these four emotional states. All the other patients (the ones who forget their appointments, the ones who cannot accept local anaesthesia, the ones who are aggressive to the reception staff . . . the list is endless) are in one of the three remaining emotional states. So, if we can convert all patients into patients in that one important positive emotional state, life in practice becomes much easier.

Consider the following scenarios and describe how you would deal with them if they were to happen in your practice. Also think about with which of them you would find it most difficult to deal, and which you would regard as a very minor issue.

staff know a lot more than they will tell you, that one has to be frightfully experienced and clever to participate properly. Both businesses have, if you like, a sort of 'ceremonial order' which, although it is very very familiar and simple to all the staff, can seem positively intimidating to a customer or patient. Finally, both businesses require their clients/customers to part with hard-earned cash in recompense for what you provide!

Of course, there are endless and complex ways of relating to your patients/customers, which (purportedly) will ensure that your practice will thrive. Almost everyone has been on a communication skills course, many have read about or been to seminars on marketing, and some have

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Utilising team members to deal with the problems and emotions they find least threatening is one of the keys to converting all patients into the type of customer you want in your practice.

SCENARIO 1

You examine a fairly unco-operative 5-year-old child who has been in severe pain for 3 days. The state of the deciduous dentition is horrendous and all the Ds and Es need to be extracted. You think this will best be carried out under general anaesthetic. When you inform the mother of your view, she begins to cry. She becomes more and more upset, culminating in her sobbing uncontrollably.

Why is she so upset?

What can you do?

Who on your team would be best to deal with this?

SCENARIO 2

A woman at the reception desk is told that the dentist cannot treat her toothache as she is not a registered patient at the practice. She begins with a tirade against politicians and health authorities but ends by making a vicious verbal attack on the staff at reception. The woman calls them names and tries to get them to challenge her to a fight.

Why is the woman shouting?

What can you do to resolve this situation peacefully?

Are the reception staff the best people to deal with the woman?

SCENARIO 3

An elderly man comes to your practice asking for a mouthwash 'to heal his mouth up'. He tells you that he's had an ulcer for months but that it is not painful. He refuses point blank to have his mouth examined and simply repeats his request for a mouth wash.

Why will the man not let you look in his mouth?

Is there any way you can help him?

Who should deal with this gentleman?

Each of these scenarios illustrates negative emotional states which patients might be in. However, each team member will view the scenarios differently. Some people will find the last scenario easier to deal with than the other two. Yet, if you speak to other members of your team, it is very likely that they would choose a different scenario from you, as being the most 'uncomfortable' one.

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This paper refers to the 2pm session being held at the Bridgewater Hall on Friday, 25 April 2003, as part of the BDA National Annual Conference and Trade Exhibition. Liz Kay will cover various aspects of customer care.

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