

Receptionists **must** have *brilliant* people skills

By Heather Dallas¹

It is vital that whoever is front of house in a dental practice, ie on reception, has excellent people skills. Why is this important? If you look at customer complaint statistics, 75% of business is lost on the first impression.

Many people on reception juggle this with another role, eg that of dental nurse, hygienist, practice manager, dentist ... so it's even more important they have the right attitude and skills.

I believe this starts with recruiting the right person. Ask questions to give examples of evidence about their mind set and enthusiasm. You can train people in skills like time management, telephone manner and technical skills. It is essential they want to do the job and have good rapport skills such as emotional intelligence, empathy, building connections with people, putting themselves in patients' shoes, etc.

Anxious patients

An example would be with anxious patients. Most patients do not find coming to the dental practice an enjoyable experience. Anxiety may be based on a negative past experience, which may go back years. Or, a patient might be fearful about the unknown. The person on reception can put them at ease with their manner, genuine friendliness, open facial expression, professional posture and welcoming words.

We know most first impressions are created by what people see. Uniforms should look professional and polished and the position of the desk should be where the patient walking in can see the receptionist front-on.

Environment

The environment of the reception and waiting area are also key. Put yourself in the new patient's shoes and see what they see, hear what they hear, feel what they feel. See the colours of the decoration, the neatness of the area, the artwork; do you have distractions eg television, a fish tank? A great way of creating rapport

visually is to have a 'Meet the Team' photo in the reception area. Think about what music is played – is it relaxing? How comfortable are the chairs in the waiting area? Is the desk of the right height to be welcoming? Are there any barriers, eg the receptionist looking at their computer screen or those awful glass windows that open and close in front of the patients' faces?

Courtesy

The team should agree a policy for greeting the patients as they see appropriate to be professional and approachable. Do they use Mr, Mrs, Ms or first name? Ideally make a note of what the patient prefers in their notes.

Juggling

I have worked with hundreds of receptionists, whether this is their full time or part time role, through the British Dental Association's (BDA's) courses and conferences. They often talk of how stressful it is to juggle a busy workload. Again the team could agree how they can all organise their time: what time management techniques work for the team, giving clear priorities rather than 'urgent'; using an A, B, C system; agreeing how much time the receptionist needs to organise their own day, for example being patient-free for the first 15 minutes in the day.

Handling complaints

The second complaint I hear about is dealing with difficult patients and people. Having a policy in place about how to handle complaints is very important. Anyone who is dealing with patients must be assertive, not aggressive. They need to know how to negotiate and what they can offer the patient as 'coinage' to calm them down if necessary, for example a free clean. Being absolutely clear about payment terms will instil confidence in the receptionist.

In summary, the attitude and skills of the receptionist play a big part in the success of the business.

'THE RECEPTIONIST CAN PUT PATIENTS AT EASE WITH THEIR GENUINE FRIENDLINESS, OPEN FACIAL EXPRESSION, PROFESSIONAL POSTURE AND WELCOMING WORDS.'

The BDA is running a Telephone and reception skills course on Friday 16 May 2014 at the BDA headquarters in London to help equip those with reception responsibilities with the necessary skills to project the right impression, listen effectively, and cope with situations when under pressure.

For further details, visit www.bda.org/training or call the events booking hotline on 020 7563 4590.

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bdjteam201412