

Customer care

What does customer care really mean, asks **Stephen Hancocks**, and how can we apply it to the practice?

For some, customer care is yet another example that the country's gone soft, while for others it almost borders on a religion. For the majority of us thoughts of customer care fall into a middle ground of irritated bemusement coloured with a sneaking suspicion that perhaps it is something we should 'get into' even if we're not sure quite how.

The starting point is knowing clearly what sort of customers (or should that be patients? hmm, not sure) the practice wants to attract. Much will depend on the personality of the dentist or dentists but it also has a lot to do with the team dynamic. Let's start by aiming high and going for the Club Class market. Once that is clear the patients (oops, done it again) customers that you want to encourage and the care you will need to offer will follow.

High street shops are already very well versed in this method of defining their own brands of shopper care, which for the most part means that they get it about right for the type of market that they are in. There is no point whatsoever, for example, in popping into Halfords and asking for their late-Victorian landscape painting department. Not only are they not geared up for it, they simply wouldn't have one. Even if they did you'd have some spotty-faced adolescent in grey tracky bottoms and back-to-front baseball cap saying something like, 'just up there on the

right past the roller blades, but mind your fur coat on those bike chains, they've been dripping a bit since lunchtime.'

Similarly there wouldn't be much point in chancing into your local auction house for a pint of semi-skimmed milk and a packet of Hobnobs. 'Hobnobs, madam? Is madam quite sure that they appear in one's current catalogue?'

The same is going to be the case in the practice. Don't bother getting handcrafted terracotta dishes full of pigmented stones, individually washed in Indonesian island water, topped with fragrant oils of the Himalayas to sit next to the patient's washing operatory if the lavvy floor is covered in lino – 'cause that's all that the grubby humanity that pass through your waiting room are used to.

There is so much to be learned from other 'sectors'. We are clearly not in the 'no frills' arena so there is no question of booking everyone at the same time and asking them to form a queue in the first-come, first-served school of rationing. By the same thinking, out goes 'making an appointment' and in comes 'requesting a reservation'. Is it time to allow customers to book online and print off their own cards? Waiting rooms are so passé when you can invite customers to settle into the deep, cosy recesses of the Club Class Lounge sofas.

And how about 'treatment announcements': "bing-bong", will Mrs Johnson please make her way to surgery organza where her lower right seven full gold crown is waiting to be seated?

Choice is, of course, paramount in all things. So, a menu of options is the first consideration: the bib – we have the Tibetan wool-weave or a rather pleasing Highland goathair (both wipe-clean laminated for easy sterilisation)

disposable saliva ejectors in a range of tasteful pastel shades to match madam's mood and a succulent selection of herbal mouthwashes to finish with.

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Merchandising is another area ripe for customer-caring and to be fully exploited. That expensive practice logo that took so long to decide on can be pressed into use. Have it incorporated into a bijou collection of exclusive leisurewear, soft furnishings and household goods. How your customers will thrill to donning a double-stitched polo-shirt emblazoned with the legend 'I've been S&P'd at SmileMores'. A selection of embroidered cushion covers and 'throws' with an oral health theme will soon be the expected norm in local homes of distinction and what better talking point over tea and crumpets can you offer your clients than the exclusive home-made miscellany of practice sugar-free conserves?

Forget too the grimy notion of whipping lab work out of an old Tupperware lunch box encrusted with drips of Plaster of Paris. Each bespoke item should be individually wrapped in tissue paper and lifted lightly, but with panache, from one of those dinky sized, superior stiff brown-paper designer bags with the moulded string handles.

Then again, that touchy business of payment. Should you invest in some of those restaurant-style leather wallets with the credit card sized pocket to slide the bill discreetly across the spittoon towards them? And is service included, an added extra or at the discretion of the customer? Obviously there will be no discreet mints or boiled sweets handed over with the change, or receipt, but what about a mini-floss pack as that little added touch which humbly says 'thank you – we care'. Yes, we do - customer don't care, was made to care! Do call again.

