

Creating the Ultimate Patient Experience Through Technology

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BY **NEAL PATEL, DDS** -- January 21st, 2014



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When I began my dental practice five years ago from scratch, I became well aware of one crucial fact -- nobody truly looks forward to a dental appointment. This isn't to say I had some kind of inferiority complex, or that my care wasn't very good. No, the truth is nobody really wants to go to ANY dentist unless they have to.

Is that kind of mindset really the best for a doctor-patient relationship? That's why I was determined to avoid the tried and true when it came to running my dental practice. I wanted to see happy faces coming and going. If I was going to improve people's smiles, I wanted to see them in action. I learned something critical on the way to reaching that goal, and it can be applied to virtually any other business.

I know what you must be thinking -- how is this recent graduate going to tell me what needs to happen in my practice? Just sit down for a few minutes and let me share some information that might make a huge impact on your practice. Even if you're thinking about preparing your practice to sell, at least you will know what appeals to young practitioners looking to buy.

When I started my dental practice, I didn't have many thoughts

about doing things differently. I thought I would be a "normal dentist." I'd buy a chair, get a drill, get the appropriate numbing agents, install the big light, and start working on patients. After I had my practice outfitted for general dentistry, it became clear to me -- as I saw patient after patient approaching my office with trepidation -- that most people were actually fearful of the whole dental experience.

As dentists, we forget how people might view our services. In our minds, it's about helping with whatever treatments are needed to solve an oral issue, and nothing more. But there's a whole lot more going on in our patients' minds. I came to understand that their fear was getting in the way of my providing the best possible care, because patients would either skip appointments or not make them in the first place.

The problem is that we reenact every single aspect of what runs through our apprehensive patients' minds prior to their appointment. What if we throw in a few surprises and throw them a curveball, making an effort to change the way they perceive dentistry? The No. 1 thing I had to understand was how dental patients felt, and I put myself in their shoes (or put on their dental bibs, to be more accurate). I had to understand what they were afraid of, and try to remove or minimize as many of those phobias as possible.

What was the focus of a dental patient's anxiety? Clearly, needles, pain, gagging on impression materials, the smells, the noise, the same old reupholstered chair that sticks to sweaty skin, and the discomfort of ongoing or lengthy treatments. Well, the problem is that some of these will always factor into dental treatment. I couldn't completely eliminate all those negatives. But what I could do was design a practice that would put patients much more at ease. That, to me, would require nothing less than a complete "rewrite" of how a conventional dental practice should operate. Instead of just assuming things should be done how they've always been done, I had to think through every element and decide how best it served the patient.

Of course, whenever you rewrite the rules of a well-established business, you take a big risk. I had to believe in myself and my ideas enough to follow through with my new ideas. My entire business plan had to change so that my efforts revolved around what was

TECHNOLOGY IMPLEMENTATION

easiest for my patients, rather than operate like a traditional dentist making the traditional profit. In other words, the concept of seeing a certain number of patients a week or performing a certain number of procedures, and using traditional instrumentation to ensure a certain level of profitability had to “go out the window.”

Becoming customer-centric could have meant that I would take a loss. But I felt that if everything was done for the consumer and appreciated by the consumer, then everything else would fall into place.

Here are the main principles I based my practice on:

- The patient’s treatment should be as pain free as possible.
- The patient’s experience should be as comfortable and enjoyable as possible.
- The patient should not be afraid prior to an appointment.
- The patient should understand the treatment thoroughly and feel in control.

There’s nothing new or novel about these objectives, right? Well, let’s throw in one more that trumps everything.

- Implement a new dental technology every six months that will impact the patient experience.

Why? Because patients want to feel that you are staying current. Because patients sense the excitement that staff exude when they work with a progressive dentist. Because patients sense the excitement and positive energy from dentists who are motivated by new technology.

As dentists, we participate in CE courses to increase our clinical skills and knowledge base. It eventually trickles down to affect our patients in a positive manner. Unfortunately, patients don’t have the ability to understand the difference in the details. They don’t know you learned a new bonding technique; to them it’s just a filling. They don’t look at the details of your materials and care to understand the intricacies of every step in delivering great dentistry. What they do notice is if there is something new in the operator that they did not see the last appointment. I promise you they will say, “So, looks like you got a new toy, Doc!” It’s the perfect start to a conversation about how your practice is different and how you decided to invest in your practice to deliver better care to your patients.

New technology every six months -- yes, I know what you’re thinking -- more costs! Consider me, a practitioner who is willing to continually invest in my practice because I know it is working. In the long run, the cost of losing a patient is greater than the investment in technology. Let me ask you this, what is the cost of losing a patient to a practitioner like me who is willing to reinvest in the one machine that I know is working, the practice? In an unstable economy, the best investment is your practice, where you have the most control. Technology is going to be expensive, and although I routinely advocate CBCT and CAD/CAM to really

launch a practice into high gear, it doesn’t have to be an expensive investment your first go at it.

I will discuss these other technologies in future columns for Dental Economics, but I need you to warm up to me first, and to trust me with the advice I give. So let’s start this journey easy with something simple, something that is ultimately used for every procedure. The one instrument that I trust most dentists use on a daily basis is the handpiece, both restorative and surgical.

Something so simple can have a dramatic impact in how you perform dentistry. Let me ask you -- what is one consumer brand that just about every household in America is familiar with? Apple! In particular, the iPhone and iPad. Did you know that there is a technology available that uses the iPad as an interface for providing dental treatment? Let me introduce you to the iChiropro from Bien Air. The iChiropro is an implant motor that uses an iPad to control a pre-programmed clinical sequence for implantology. This equipment is simple to use, yet patients identify with the technology and it instantly becomes a conversation piece. Don’t get confused; it’s not just a toy. It honestly runs circles around any implant motor that I’ve had in my practice.

Why not consider the best handpiece so that you can enjoy the luxury of cutting with an electric handpiece? Not just any electric handpiece, but the best Bien Air has to offer. Once you’ve experienced cutting with a Bien Air, you won’t tolerate a traditional/generic turbine again. I recently implemented the iChiropro implant motor from Bien Air. It is hands down the best investment for any practice that is looking at implementing technology. It is a simple yet sophisticated motor that delivers precision and power with style. I know that some of you are laughing and asking, is this guy seriously talking about handpieces? Yes, I am! Here is an analogy -- cutting with Bien Air is like writing with a Mont Blanc, and if you are ever handed a cheap ballpoint pen that doesn’t write consistently, you will throw it across the room before you finish your first word! Unfortunately, some of you are accustomed to writing with those cheap ballpoints and don’t realize what you are missing.

Far too often, with the turbulent economy, I see my colleagues hide in a corner, waiting for the “economy” to turn the corner before they consider technology upgrades for their practice. My observation is that their “practice economy” mimics that of our great nation – unstable. As dentists, we control our practice economy by implementing simple changes. Do you think I’m wrong? Try it and see what happens.

The iPad on the Bien Air iChiropro has multiple uses. You can easily archive your before-and-after cases, and install patient education videos and postop instructions, all on the iPad. In fact, these days patients will probably know how to navigate the iPad better than the practitioner.

Everyone is more comfortable with these technologies because of

their smartphones and tablets, and they actually trust them more than they might trust a doctor's opinion. Because I take the time to use the tools they do, and explain things in a language they're comfortable with, some of the traditional walls between doctor and patient can be taken down. Why is that important? In the past, dental patients have had to assume that the work the dentist does on them is necessary and appropriate. If they didn't fully understand what the dentist was doing, however, that boosted their anxiety levels.

By properly informing them through understandable language and visuals, they don't have to assume anything. I open a line of communication in which they can understand their choices and chime in at any point. They don't have to just sit in my chair, stiffen with apprehension, and wait for whatever I do to them. Instead, we're partners in the process, and they know I care about how they feel. Ultimately, this allows me to perform at higher levels and have more satisfaction in my service. I don't have to worry about opinions patients are afraid to share, because I make sure to get those opinions before they walk out the door, and I sleep much better for it.

This attitude of openness and respect for patients is ingrained in each member of my staff as well, and it's allowed my staff and me to feel confident in what we do, and feel really good about what we do. Our patients validate us through their positive feedback, and give us credibility through their results. I think that the usual dentist office is more concerned with controlling patients than empowering patients. Having our patients see us as having value, instead of just inflicting pain, brings a lot more clarity to our professional roles.

The ultimate ROI: Reinvesting in yourself

I've been lucky to have my rethinking of the traditional dental practice pay off. That leads to another interesting crossroads for a business -- do you take the extra profits you make and take a great vacation or buy an expensive sports car, or do you take the money and reinvest it in your business to make it even better? To me, the answer is simple -- I put those funds back into the practice to take patient comfort and care to the next level in two specific ways -- by upgrading our amenities and our technology.

It's also important because this shows we respect the most valuable asset our patients have these days -- time. These services make the impact of the dental appointment less invasive to their schedules and livelihood, as well as providing something in return for the time they've invested in coming to our offices. The results have been amazing. Some patients actually stop by my practice for a cup of coffee on their way to work. And we truly welcome that. Not many people go out of their way to visit their local dentist when they don't even have an appointment!

Patients sense that my practice is also kind of my playground,

where I do what I love to do. They can tell I take pride in the office because it's pristine with no clutter, the equipment is at the absolute cutting edge of what the field has to offer, and my employees have a passion for what we're able to offer patients. Another important point is that even with all these "extras," my fees are still comparable to competing practices. The assumption would be that somebody has to pay for all the bells and whistles. The truth is that because I've integrated specific technologies that improve clinical workflow and patient care, it has actually lowered my costs.

Obviously, I've created a lot of "new rules of success" that are specific to my practice. But I think the spirit of what I've done applies to any kind of business. You don't just hang out a shingle and do everything the same way everybody else does. I tried that and found it didn't work for me. I believe you have to invest in your business at a level that the public can see and appreciate, even when it comes to your own development.

The bottom line is, what kind of experience are you delivering to your customers? Is it the same-old same-old, or are you really trying to up the ante and take your product or service to a level that is really going to get people excited about you and your practice? Success comes from standing out from your crowd of competitors. Satisfaction comes from out-delivering your customer expectations. Deliver a world-class experience, and you'll receive a lifetime of both.

Dr. Neal Patel, dentist and international dental educator, focuses his private practice on precision dentistry, implementing technology at the highest level at his cutting-edge facility. Widely published, he is perhaps best known as an educator of the world's dental clinicians. He teaches 3-D digital imaging and computer-guided surgery. Contact him at drpatel@infinitesiles.com.