

Patient Service

I'm almost ready to publish my first book. One of the few remaining tasks is to hire the printing company. After sending out a bid sheet, I selected the top three contenders and called to ask them for some sample book products. Contender number one said, "Thank you for considering us. We'd be delighted to send you some books. Should I send them overnight or priority mail?" Contender number two replied, "No problem. We'll mail you several types of books and we'll send you an email to confirm this conversation." Contender number three grumbled, "Can you put this in an email?"

Guess which printer I won't be using?

What's chilling about contender number three is that this person might work for the best printing house in the universe. The person who grumbled may be the only negative spoke in that company's wheel. I'll never know, because that's the last time I will connect with them.

You've heard a lot about customer service, which for you translates into patient service. I'm sure the three people I asked about sending book samples have been trained in customer service. You've probably enrolled your team in continuing-education courses on the subject.

Yet it's still missing in action all over the place. I bet if this article were a speech and I asked, "Can anyone tell me about a negative customer service experience you've had in the last month?" everyone would raise a hand. "Consumers are beginning to feel that their needs aren't being met," explains Bonnie Jansen of the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs. "They're sick of poor service."

The message is coming through, however. Companies of all sizes are realizing that their strongest selling point can sometimes boil down to exceeding customer expectations. By doing so, the company with great customer service sets itself apart from the competition.

A recent three-year study by the National Federation of Independent Business in Washington, D.C., revealed that small businesses that heavily emphasize customer service are more likely to survive and succeed than competitors who emphasize such advantages as low prices or type of product.

Let's define some ways to shine with customer/patient service.

- **Smile.** You're in the smile business already, but sometimes it's difficult to put that smile on your face. In spite of the craziness of the moment, or the difficult patient, or the double-booked scheduling, remind yourself to meet and greet your patients and team with a pleasant and enthusiastic expression.

- **Be in the moment.** As just described, your multitasking life can make you feel fragmented and frazzled. Even so, you must appear to have nothing else on your mind but the patient you are with at the time. I once met a VIP executive at a reception. Her rapt attention made me feel like I was the only person in the room. I'm sure she had other people to connect with and other things on her mind. Yet I felt not only acknowledged, but valued by her gracious demeanor.

- **Pay attention to the little details.** Some of the most effective extras are really basic adages of conducting good business, although patients are often surprised when they occur. These include answering the phone before the third ring, calling people by their name and pronouncing it correctly, treating patients cour-

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teously at all times, promptly answering their questions, and treating them the way you would like to be treated.

- **Extend your efforts after hours.** I often tell audiences that selling is a process and a journey. You don't just do your career during office hours. You're always selling, whether it's at your child's soccer game, the grocery store, or a meeting. Are you the same gracious person without your lab coat on? You never know who's in the next bathroom stall.

- **Understand your patients.** Critical to patient service is understanding who they are, what they want, and how they think. Many of your patients accept treatment for emotional reasons, rather than for esthetics or function. Patient service means taking the time to figure out the patient.

- **Listen.** All of the above will happen when you shut up and listen. My last column for *Woman Dentist Journal*, "You Had Me at Hello," centered on the perils of over-talking and under-listening. To really meet your patients' needs, listen more than you talk.

Finally, an important key to serving your patients well is *don't try to change them*. I thank Chris Clarke-Epstein for sharing the following insightful quote by H. Jackson Brown: "Never underestimate your power to change yourself. Never overestimate your power to change others." ■

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