



June 22nd 2011

“Hail, Horses and Surveys”

Team Talk

Question from Team Member “S”: You recommended that we survey between phases. One team member isn't finding the value of it since we survey them after the new patient consultation. What's the benefit of doing this again?

Answer from Deb: Patient surveys are powerful on a number of levels. I recently experienced the significance of it when traveling to Redding Iowa (population 66) to evaluate a horse that was for sale. The weather was terrible and after riding the 1300 pound beast in the freezing rain and hail I arrived at my hotel. Looking like a drowned rat, the receptionist immediately whipped me up a cup of hot chocolate, and gave me extra towels and a plastic bag for my wet clothes.

Upon my departure the receptionist jumped out from behind the desk like a super hero, gave me a tour of their complimentary breakfast and conducted a brief survey. The continental breakfast consisted of a loaf of Wonder bread, peanut butter in a jar, hard boiled eggs, cold cereal, and a sorry looking banana with more age spots than my 94 year old aunt.

Despite the limited breakfast choices, her enthusiasm and extraordinary service made me overlook the minor deficiencies. She asked if they could have done anything different to enhance my stay. The only complaints I had was that the hotel smelled like Burger King and Febreze but her exceptional service made those issues seem minor. When I got home I immediately gave them a positive review online.

Surveying patients after the new patient consult is a great. However after multiple appointments many patients have experienced a service failure. If the first phase didn't go so hot why use the same failing systems in the next phase? I am convinced that failing systems are one of the reasons many doctors can't sell treatment phases beyond the basic restorative services.

Several clients have surveyed between the periodontal and restorative phases. One had a patient highlight four service failures by four different team members. The first was not releasing him at the promised time; the second was dust on the overhead light; the third was when the Administrative Assistant got visibly frustrated when he refused to give her his SSN, and the last was his dislike of being educated in the supine position.

Many doctors are often insulated from magnitude of service failures. That is until they see the number of inactive charts and they wonder why so many patients divorced them.

Not all satisfied patients are loyal patients. Loyal patients may sometimes be dissatisfied but they draw from their history they have with you to overcome the adverse impact of an occasional dissatisfactory experience. If your patient base is declining more 10 – 15% a year I would start surveying and take a hard look at your systems. In my experience from conducting onsite visits, secret shopper calls etc, 80% of the offices look very similar. Many think they are doing something spectacular and unique but most have never studied their competition or gotten regular feedback from a coach or patients.

Benefits of Surveys

1. Increase patient retention: A well-laid out patient survey allows practices to obtain feedback which can tremendously help to improve retention. If your retention ratio is less than 85% I would recommend you start a surveying project soon.
2. Performance feedback: Patients are the best judge of practices services and can help you determine what services or systems need improvement. One patient caused a complete overhaul of a practices Time Management and Color Coding systems. She remarked that she was *“freaked out when team members (including the doctor) jogged from room to room.”* She not only thought it was unprofessional but was concerned someone was having an emergency. One has to wonder how many patients had the same concerns but didn't voice them. In this patients mind *“if you're not in control of your time how can you be in control of my treatment?”*
3. Innovative ideas: Patients can be the best source to derive new innovative ideas. Isolation is one of the most dangerous situations we have in dentistry. Many offices think they are rock stars when they are only sand stars.
4. Marketing: With good feedback and improved patient service you can reduce your dependency on direct mail or having insurance plans be your marketing strategy.
5. Profitability: Surveying is an inexpensive way to gather, and study valuable feedback. Service failures are expensive and surveys allow you to quickly improve your management systems.

A focused questionnaire will provide higher value than a mass produced generic one. I would recommend you custom design several brief surveys. Surveys should be created for specific procedures, performance, and treatment presentations.

And don't “cherry pick!” Your tougher patients can often give you the most valuable feedback.

Recommended reading Customers for Life - by Carl Sewell

Questions or feedback? Email me at deb.hewitt@cox.net