

## Measuring patient satisfaction

**M**ost companies do not have a formal method of assessing customer satisfaction. Think of all the department stores, shopping centers, specialty stores or even large retailers that you visit and ask yourself how often any one of them has formally investigated your level of satisfaction.

All too often, companies attempt to grow by deciding what they think the customer wants and then providing that level of service. Unfortunately, many companies miss the mark and pay a price through a short- or long-term decline or even bankruptcy.

One way to look at the patients in a dental practice is to think of them as customers. They come to the practice and receive health care that is either needed or desired. Consumers seeking basic care understand that they should visit the dental practice approximately twice a year (even though not everyone acts on this), and they also know

what to expect during their time in the office. In general, patients seem reasonably satisfied with dental practices because a large number typically return every six months. However, it is highly beneficial for practices to have a good understanding of what their patients want.

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### MEASURING PATIENT SATISFACTION

One way to evaluate patient satisfaction is informal. It can be as simple as having the front desk staff member ask each patient after his or her visit, "How was your visit today?" This will provide some level of information, but it is not necessarily a true reflection of what patients feel. Some people are not comfortable telling a person who works in the practice that they are not

completely satisfied. Others will view the inquiry as simply an off-the-cuff question that does not require much thinking in terms of a response. However, it is beneficial at least to ask patients how they view their experience in the office after clinical diagnosis or treatment—and to compile a list of any comments that fall short of a rating of excellent customer service.

A second, more formal approach is to survey patients in writing. A survey should be simple and require no more than two minutes to fill out. The bulk of the survey should be questions with standardized answers such as "excellent," "good," "fair" or "poor." For example:

1. How would you rate the level of courtesy with which all of our staff members treated you? (Please choose one answer.)

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

I suggest that you include no more than 10 or 12 questions in your patient satisfaction survey.

These surveys can be printed on plain paper or as glossy brochures. I also suggest that you leave room at the bottom for a comments section in which patients can offer any additional thoughts if they wish to do so.

A patient survey is a simple and inexpensive approach to eliciting more formal patient feedback. To get a representative sample from patients, it is best not to hand patients the survey and ask them to mail it back. Unfortunately, when a patient has to take the time to fill out a survey at home and then mail it back, the response rates drop sharply. Instead, ask the patient to fill out the survey in the office, using a simple script: “Mrs. Jones, would you be nice enough to fill out a one- or two-minute patient satisfaction survey, because we always want to know what our patients

want and to strive for excellence?”

Most patients will not mind filling out a survey after hearing this. Once they have done so, have a box available for the completed survey rather than expect the patient to hand it back to the front desk staff member. Remember, people often feel awkward expressing their real views when they know someone will be directly listening to or reading them. By placing the survey in a box, the patient will feel a greater sense of anonymity. While patients certainly could sign their names, it should be noted as optional.

The results of patient satisfaction surveys can be compiled or read at staff meetings. In doing so, note that it is important to place comments in categories. One negative comment may not be meaningful, but 10 similar comments certainly

should warrant the attention of the practice.

#### **SUMMARY**

Many businesses use customer satisfaction surveys successfully. You may notice that you find one in almost every restaurant or hotel room. I do not think it is a coincidence that the hotel industry provides some of the finest customer service available. When it comes to providing excellent customer service, dental practices can learn from businesses that regularly assess customer satisfaction. ■

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