

Keeping Your Practice Recession Resistant! *Reducing Broken Appointments and No Shows*

By Cathy Jameson

The reduction of broken appointments and no shows begins in the clinical area with the clinical team stressing the significance and importance of the next appointment.

This does NOT contradict all of my reminders that every person on the team plays a role in the patient relationship and that every person on the team is ultimately accountable for the success of a full schedule, treatment acceptance and beyond. I am simply clarifying that the clinical team members have the greatest opportunity to relay the value of proceeding with the appointment schedule and/or treatment. The business team will make financial arrangements and refine their verbal skills and other systems to set this idea up for success, but if the patients don't see the value of keeping their appointment and/or don't understand the negative consequences of missing their opportunity for care, then the patient will be far less likely to schedule and pay in the midst of today's economic challenges and associated fears.

All behavior and all decisions are driven by the underlying question "what's in this for me?". It's the clinical team member who has the most time and has earned the right (and the responsibility) to help the patient understand what's coming next and why that is a benefit to the team. This is not the doctor's responsibility alone. The entire team must work together and the clinical team (hygienists and assistants as well as the dentist) must take extra care to ensure that the patients learn and believe that keeping the appointment will benefit them and serve them well. They must understand why taking care of their health *now* is a benefit to them.

We also have to be realistic that broken appointments and no shows are a fact of life. No practice will ever eliminate them, but there are proven ways to reduce them that will make a difference in every day, week, month and add up to a strong year no matter what the Dow Jones or the NASDAQ may say in economic crunch time. Here are the highlights of those proven ways to reduce broken appointments and no shows.

1. **Strongly believe in the value of your treatment.** Passion is contagious. If you believe it, your team believes it. If your team believes it, your patient can believe it. Share your deep belief – passion even – about the opportunity you have to provide the

treatment your patients need. Positive energy that stems from your belief in the value of your treatment will create intrinsic rewards that only reinforce your confidence.

2. **Polish your verbal skills.** This takes time and effort. It also often takes a coach or objective party willing to give you honest feedback and rephrasing advice. Start with great listening and documentation. Consider body language and vocal cues. Then work through a patient-friendly language that relays your compassion for them as an individual while you carefully (and with visual aids) explain the various aspects of their decision. We have seen a dramatic reduction in broken appointments and no shows after only working on verbal skills. Excellent communication isn't all innate. You can learn to communicate better and it will make a difference.

Simple phrasing adjustments to address patient objections so they can dismiss those concerns and actually hear what you're saying may make a huge difference. For example, try stating "I know how important your time is so let's work together to understand what's best for you here..." helps them stop worrying about the meeting at work or the babysitter at home and also reaffirms your awareness that they are in control (even though you're the one in a white coat), thus your interest in working together.

3. **Make a secure financial arrangement.** Even if a patient nods their head throughout the case presentation and schedules an appointment before they leave, with today's economic pressures weighing in, they'll break that appointment at the last minute for financial reasons. So, it is of utmost importance that you always find a financial solution so they know exactly what to expect the next time they return. You can address any hesitation before they leave.

As always, we still advise you to do as much dentistry per possible per appointment without stressing the patient. These days that's more difficult maybe. So, graciously accept whatever "yes" they give you and keep them in your patient family and in good health. Some say we'll start working our way out of this recession in the final quarter of 2010 and things will come roaring back. That patient may carry out the remainder of the treatment plan when things stabilize. Either way, you don't want to lose them and you do want to deliver quality care to every patient you meet.

We still firmly advise that you stay out of the banking business yourself! Do NOT try to carry these accounts on your own books or water down your

payment options with Options A through Z. Keep it simple and eliminate that stress from your life. Today's age cries out for you to maximize healthcare patient financing options more than ever. Our friends at CareCredit tell us that, as I write this article (months into our recession), patient financing is more available now than ever. CareCredit's Bete Johnson also points out that, because they're exclusive to healthcare, there have been individuals that originated in another field (like those who've used CareCredit to pay for veterinary services). So, CareCredit is actually sending patients your way because those individuals are already CareCredit users and they're looking for a dentist who offers CareCredit as an option for their oral healthcare. These are people ready to proceed, even as they walk in the door the first time!

So, sit down with the financial coordinator following your clinical case presentation and make a financial arrangement. Listen carefully to any concerns or questions the patient has and then let your business team follow up with excellent systems.

In summary

Make a concerted effort to reduce broken appointments and no shows by refining systems within your practice such as verbal skills during case presentation, financial arrangements prior to scheduling the appointment, maximizing patient financing programs and sharing your passionate belief in your care. Do not simply accept broken appointments and no shows as a sign of the times and resort to the acceptance of failure, or any level that's less than your ideal.



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