



Patient loyalty: What Can *You* Do About It?

By Janet and Larry Steward

Everyday nationwide tens of thousands of dental patients fail to show up for their appointments.

The problem is enormous at both the individual practice level as well as for dentistry as a whole. Practice losses for each missed appointment range from around \$100 to thousands for complex or cosmetic procedures. Using an average loss of just \$300 per no show per practice adds up to a whopping \$1,000,000 a day or more for the dental industry; a shocking figure.

If we're being nice, we just call these patients "disloyal" for obvious reasons. But there's more to the issue of patient loyalty than merely showing up for an appointment. It has everything to do with how patients feel about their dental practices; they're (a) engaged, (b) ambivalent, or (c) dissatisfied.

Dissatisfied patients usually speak up; either with their mouths or their feet. Naturally, if they're not expressing disappointment, most practices assume their patients are satisfied, and they're mentally placed in the "loyal patient" pile. We assume that they are engaged, that they like us and they'll be coming back.

Of course every dental practice wants loyal patients because they don't miss appointments, they pay their bills, and they follow their dentist's treatment recommendations. Patients who are ambivalent or dissatisfied are likely to be looking for another dental practice or, if they stay, are usually among the pool of patients who have broken appointments, don't pay their bills, and create other problems.

Research tells us that dental practices can do much more to increase the number of loyal patients and to move that silent group of ambivalent patients into the loyal patient group. While the issues are complex, the answer is simple: do more to engage patients and thereby convert them to the loyalist column. Here's the million dollar question: *How* do you engage a patient?

Dental practices are similar to most businesses in this country; nearly 70 percent of their patients fall into the ambivalent category. They don't know how they feel because their experience wasn't really good and it wasn't really bad. About average, they might say.

Successful dentists realize patient loyalty is not an entitlement but rather a hard won privilege that must be earned with every single patient at every single visit. They are aware that patient loyalty is an emotional response – not a logical one – it's all about how they feel when they are in your practice.



So how do you transform the ambivalent patients into loyalists? Here are some highly recommended steps:

You won't know if you don't ask. Conduct surveys to find out exactly how patients feel about you and your practice. Don't use anecdotal comments from 1 to 2 percent of your patients as your guide. A professional, independent survey of your patients is an inexpensive way to get a much more accurate picture of where you stand with your patients. Internal surveys have a way of only being handed out to patients that the team likes. It often does not give a truly accurate result. Companies like Valmont Research 888-679-0991 who specialize in this area can help. If your survey shows you're in the top 10 percent of practices that receive extremely high marks across the board, stop here. Just keep on doing what you and your team have been doing. If not, consider the next steps.

Monitor to get better results. Follow up on every patient who has missed an appointment, then send the chart to the doctor for review. Was it just patient oversight, was it an unavoidable circumstance, has the patient changed to another dentist or was the patient simply apathetic about their visit?

Take action. In practices with ambivalent patients, the doctor and team are merely involved in a series of uninspired transactions with patients rather than actively engaging them. If this is what's happening in your practice, it's time to assess and take action to engage patients at each and every point of patient contact, from the initial new patient telephone call to post op telephone calls when appropriate. If you can't do it yourself, get help, either from a peer or a reputable consultant.

Here are some additional tips that can help guide your practice toward the transformation:

1. Being friendly is critically important, but it is not engagement, which requires learning about patients and showing genuine and heart felt interest in them, their families, and their lives.
2. Never take patient loyalty for granted. Roll out the red carpet for new patients, but never sacrifice anything with your current patients. To boost profitability, treat all patients like royalty because they are.
3. Loyalty is not created through low fees or free services such as whitening. The doctor and every team member must be engaged with the patients, which means asking about their lives and listening intently to them.
4. If you and your team don't have time to engage your patients now, you may have plenty of time later because ambivalent patients are far more likely to be no-shows for future appointments.
5. We're in an era of consumer activism in which the patients feels they are entitled to excellent service and anything less leads to apathy or dissatisfaction.
6. The doctor and team who spend the majority of their time talking about dentistry have the patient's best interests at heart, but that does not matter to the patient unless they are



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engaged. There's an old saying: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care". Nowhere is that more true than in a dental practice.

7. The entire team must communicate the value of what the patient is receiving because most patients don't know the value of the clinical care they are receiving.

No matter how hard you try, there are always going to be the proverbial bad apples. You can't please everyone, so don't blame yourself or your team for the occasional failure. If a business can turn 68 percent of their customers from ambivalence to 68 percent engaged, you are really in the winners circle.

When you make aspiring to excellence and patient engagement part of your practice's DNA, you will have so many loyal patients you might need to hire additional team members.