Creating a five-star dental practice

The various skill sets needed to deliver clinical dental services at the highest level

By Dr William Cheung, Hong Kong

Introduction

Dentists are not only health care professionals but also health care professional service providers. The word "service" is important to remember because it changes our perspective to focus on the needs of our patients as we treat them. Our education at dental school teaches us to take care of our patients' oral health needs; however, patients have other physical and psychological needs too that we cannot overlook. Most patients are scared to see the dentist, and it is our responsibility to help them overcome their fear. This is an important way to build rapport with our patients. When they are comfortable coming to see us and happy with our service, they will gladly refer their family and friends to us. Fostering rapport is an important practice builder. This is why it is important to look after the overall well-being of our patients and not just their oral health needs. Traditional dental education places great emphasis on teaching us how to develop our clinical skills, but neglects to teach us how to look after our patients’ psychological needs. Furthermore, we need another skill set to run a successful dental practice. A dental office is a business entity and so we need to learn certain business skills, but neglects to teach us how to do so. One thing to keep in mind is that the office should be set up to integrate any technologically advanced equipment when we decide to buy. That means having the necessary space, computer hardware and software, and wiring network to support such equipment. In other words, we need to plan ahead during the stage of office design and renovation. It is also important to pay attention to details when it comes to office design and decor. It is necessary to plan carefully regarding the size and location of each room to maximize workflow efficiency. Last but not least, the reception area should be designed with patients' comfort in mind; this is the area where patients first encounter the practice. Therefore, it is important to impress them when they first arrive.

How hotels are rated

The word “hospitality” comes from the word “hospital”, which means welcoming guests with warmth and generosity. Hotels are rated according to their facilities and service. In technology terms, this means hardware and software. Facilities, such as the types of rooms and suites, variety of restaurants and recreational facilities, like fitness centres, swimming pools and spas, all represent the hardware. The software component is represented by guest services. Five-star service is executed and presented in a flawless manner so that the guest is pampered by a professional, attentive team of staff. When we translate these into the dental practice that means up-to-date treatment facilities, equipment and instruments, as well as how we treat our patients as a team, including front-office staff, back-office support staff, chairside assistants and dentists. The entire team should share the common objective of making the experience of the patients a positive one every time.

The hardware

The hardware of a dental practice is the office setup, which includes basic renovation, office decor, equipment, instruments and materials. With the advancement of technology, we need to consider how we should integrate technology into our practices, keeping in mind that technology is constantly evolving with new advancements. For instance, in addition to conventional equipment, such as dental units, we now have available to us advanced technology, such as operating microscopes, digital intra-oral cameras, digital radiographic imaging (including intra-oral radiographs, dental panoramic tomograms and CBCT), soft- and hard-tissue lasers, and intra-oral scanners with CAD/CAM milling devices. It is important to understand that not every office needs all the latest equipment, it depends on what type of treatment we perform the most and how technology can be beneficial to the overall production. It is also important to calculate the cost and benefits before deciding to purchase any piece of high-tech equipment because some are expensive not only to purchase but also to maintain. Therefore, we need to decide whether to buy and when to do so. One thing to keep in mind is that the office should be set up to integrate any technologically advanced equipment when we decide to buy. That means having the necessary space, computer hardware and software, and wiring network to support such equipment. In other words, we need to plan ahead during the stage of office design and renovation. It is also important to pay attention to details when it comes to office design and decor. It is necessary to plan carefully regarding the size and location of each room to maximize workflow efficiency. Last but not least, the reception area should be designed with patients' comfort in mind; this is the area where patients first encounter the practice. Therefore, it is important to impress them when they first arrive.

The software

The software of a dental practice refers to how we treat our customers. This is not only the responsibility of the service providers, such as the dentists and the hygienists; it is very much a team effort of the entire staff. Patients' experience of the dental practice starts when they make their first contact with the practice, usually when they call for their initial appointment as a new patient. Therefore,
the person who answers the call is important. This leads us to important management advice regarding staff. There should be a job description for every position in the practice and the type of personality that fits the respective job description must be determined. There are plenty of tools available to establish an individual’s personality type. We use the DiSC (dominance, influence, steadiness, conscientiousness) assessment tool in our practice to assess the personality type of applicants before we interview them to confirm. We need a different personality type to fill the position at the front office than that for a laboratory technician or an accountant. Hiring the wrong person for a position only brings frustrations; we can train a person to perform a certain task, but we cannot change his or her personality. One essential common characteristic is being a team player; since it only takes one self-centred individual to destroy the hard work of the entire team. It is necessary to pay attention to the appearance of staff, such as uniform and hairstyle. They should be taught the proper manner to adopt in their interactions with patients. This is an area in which we can learn from top-rated five-star hotels; they know how to train their staff regarding proper manner and behaviour to make their guests feel comfortable, important and relaxed.

Finally, it is necessary to handle complaints properly. Complaints are inevitable in any service industry. It is important to prevent complaints, resolve any complaint to the customer’s satisfaction and learn from complaints. It is essential to adopt a routine of regular staff training sessions to cover different areas of customer service. Establish what we expect of our staff and communicate this so that they understand what they are expected to do.

**Conclusion**

Creating a five-star dental practice takes a great deal of planning and training. Office design and proper equipment so that we can deliver high-quality treatment are important. Leadership comes from the practice owner. Success requires a team effort. Expectations should be communicated clearly to all of the staff, encouraging them to work together as a team with the common objective of serving patients so that they have a positive experience every time they come to the practice. Needless to say, we dentists have to do our part to ensure clinical services are of high quality and dedicated to our patients’ satisfaction. That is why they come to us in the first place.

Editorial note: During APDC 2017, Dr Cheung will be holding a lecture titled “Creating a 5-star dental practice” on 24 May from 11:00 to 12:30 in Hall B.

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