

The Art of Eliminating Friction: Transforming Initial Calls into Lasting Appointments

by Imtiaz Manji



Have you ever wondered what goes through a patient's mind from the moment they decide to schedule an appointment until they step into your practice? As dental specialists, our mission goes beyond delivering excellent care. It's about creating a seamless, stress-free journey for patients, from the moment they are referred by their general dentist to their experience in our chair. Studies show that 70% of patient loyalty is influenced by a team's ability to manage patient interactions empathetically, starting with the first contact. Whether a patient seeks you directly or is referred, our focus should be on removing friction from every interaction. By refining these touchpoints, we not only ensure that patients keep their appointments but also strengthen our relationships with referring doctors, building a foundation for long-term collaboration and success. And most importantly we get to provide the patient with much needed treatment.

Understanding the Patient's Mindset

As dental specialists, it's crucial to approach every patient interaction with empathy. Behind each phone call is a person grappling with their own fears and uncertainties—concerns that are often heightened by the fact that they are being referred to a specialist. These feelings are diverse, ranging from deep-seated anxiety about being in a specialist's chair to concerns over treatment costs and insurance coverage. Consider this: nearly six out of ten patients worry about potential pain, while almost half are anxious about the financial impact, particularly because they're stepping into a specialist's office. It's not uncommon for patients to delay or avoid scheduling their referral appointment altogether due to these fears. The worry that a

Did You Know?

70% of patient loyalty is due to empathetic interactions from the first call, leading to higher retention and referrals.

—BJGP

simple referral could lead to a series of costly or painful procedures often stops patients from moving forward. Understanding these emotional hurdles is the first step in refining how we engage with them and help alleviate these concerns from the start.

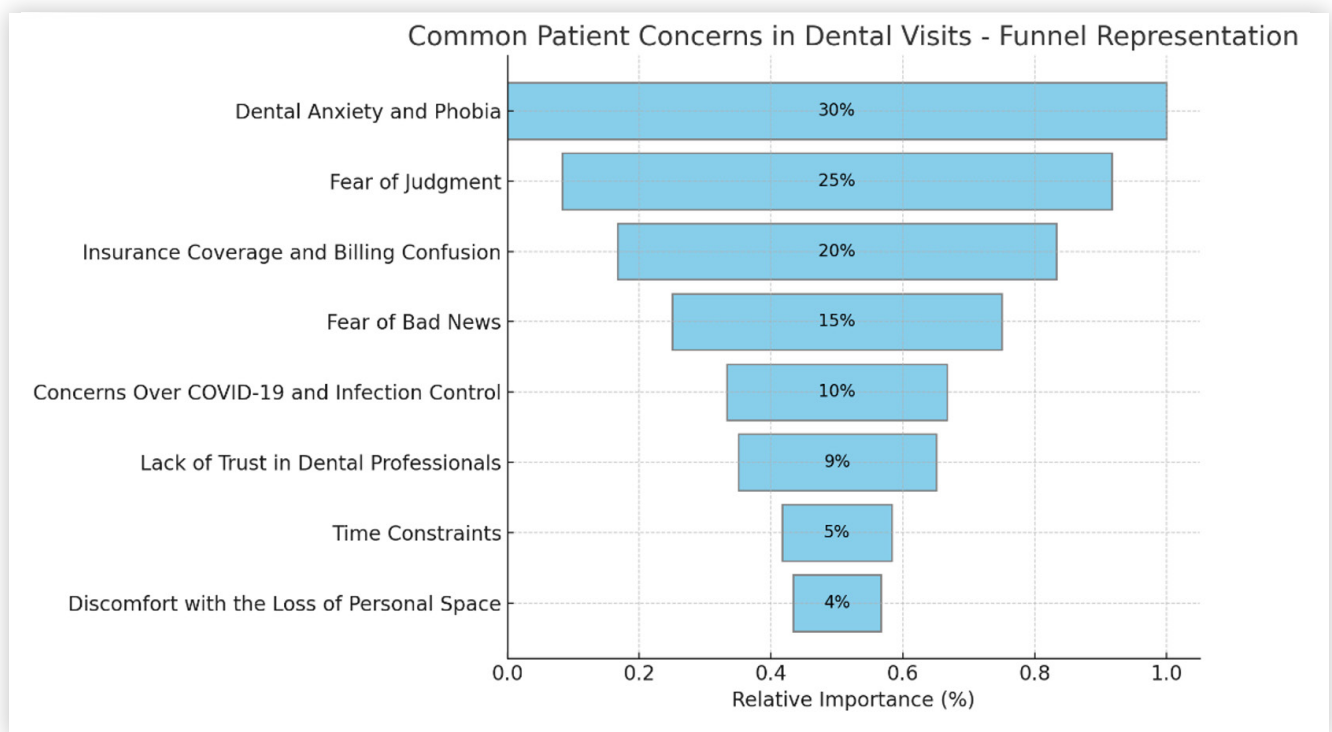
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The Source of Their Call: Understanding Patient Value

Building trust with a patient starts from the very first call, and how you approach it should depend on how they discovered your practice. Patients referred by their general dentist or another specialist often carry a high level of professional trust and anticipation. The value created by the referring doctor sets a high bar for your practice, and your goal is to meet—or exceed—those expectations. Some referring doctors give patients the option of choosing between two or three specialists, while others specifically highlight you as the very best. Understanding this distinction is critical to how you build trust from the first interaction. Conversely, when a patient is referred by a satisfied family member or a happy patient, there is a natural transfer of trust. This warm handoff creates a strong foundation for the relationship. On the other hand, individuals who find your practice through an online search or social media may come with different expectations and less built-in trust. They require more reassurance and engagement to establish confidence. Navigating these initial perceptions with care is crucial to converting interest into long-term relationships, both with the patient and your referring doctors.

Elevating Patient Engagement

Creating an environment that fosters uninterrupted patient engagement is essential for deepening connections during calls. Establishing protocols within your team to minimize disruptions or utilizing voicemail and answering services during high-traffic times is crucial to ensure that every patient call receives your undivided attention. The initial moments of the call are critical in setting the tone for the entire interaction. By actively listening to their concerns, responding with genuine empathy, and delivering clear, comprehensive responses, you make each patient feel uniquely seen and heard at that moment. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge how they were referred to your practice, showing respect and appreciation for the trust that referring doctors, patients, or team members have placed in you.



Strategic Listening Questions

Our goal is to make every patient feel comfortable and understood during the initial call, while also respecting their time and ensuring they are promptly appointed. The questions provided below are designed

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as a starting point, helping to create a welcoming space for the patient while gathering essential information. Each practice should adapt and find their comfortable approach to patient interaction, considering these questions as a foundation.

1. Understanding Motivation and Dental History:

- Which doctor or practice referred you to us?
- Can you share why they recommended you visit us?
- Did they provide any specific information or records that you'd like us to be aware of?
- Are there any particular concerns the referring doctor wanted us to focus on during your visit?

2. Identifying Immediate Concerns:

- What specific issue or discomfort led your referring doctor to contact us?
- Are there any pressing dental or health concerns that you need us to address right away?
- What are your main goals or expectations from this appointment?

3. Assessing Overall Health and Symptoms:

- Are there any health conditions we should be aware of during your treatment?
- Have you noticed signs like bleeding when brushing or flossing?
- Are you currently experiencing any pain or sensitivity in your teeth or gums?
- How do you feel your overall dental health has been recently?

4. Additional Insightful Questions:

- Have you ever worked with a specialty practice before?
- Is there anything about your overall health that we need to be aware of to support you better?
- How can we ensure that your visit is as comfortable and positive as possible?
- Do you have any concerns with us communicating with your referring doctor to align on the best treatment approach for you?
- Do you have any specific preferences or requests for how we communicate and share information with you?

Each question is crafted to foster a comfortable listening space, encouraging patients to share openly, which is instrumental in delivering personalized dental care and ensuring patients receive the best possible treatment. It's important to establish that we work closely with the referring doctor to create continuity and comfort for the patient, acknowledging the trust they have placed in us. This approach not only aids in understanding their immediate needs but also establishes a foundation of trust and reassurance, affirming that their well-being is of utmost importance. Furthermore, it helps maintain a strong connection with our referring doctors, recognizing the trust they have placed in us.

Strategizing Front Desk Operations for Optimal Engagement

In a busy practice, the front desk acts as the operational heart, handling an extensive range of essential tasks. They are responsible for answering calls, welcoming patients, managing check-outs, and processing payments—central to the clinic's day-to-day functioning. Amid this constant hustle, maintaining meaningful and attentive interactions, especially with new patients, is a substantial challenge.

It is vital for dental practices to acknowledge the advanced multitasking skills required at the front desk. The ceaseless stream of duties can often overshadow the need for quality interactions with new patients. To address this, dental practices should create their own "Step-by-Step Guide to Optimizing Front Desk Operations." This comprehensive resource offers actionable strategies ensuring that new patients, essential for the practice's growth, receive the attention they need.

For larger practices, creating designated roles, like specific staff for call management, can help maintain focus on new patient engagements. However, smaller practices might find such specialization challenging to implement. For them, the guide suggests creative solutions like using signaling systems or visual indicators to alert staff of new patient calls, thus prioritizing these interactions without disruptions.

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Did You Know?

First impressions at dental practices are made within the first 7 seconds at the front desk, significantly affecting patient satisfaction and retention.

—Journal of Patient Experience

The overarching aim for practices, regardless of their size, is clear: to merge the wide-ranging tasks of the front desk with prioritizing new patient engagements. By leveraging the structured approaches outlined in the guide, from dedicated roles to strategic communication methods, practices can reimagine front desk operations. This enriches patient experiences and ensures the practice operates seamlessly, making the “Step-by-Step Guide for Optimizing Front Desk Operations” an invaluable tool for any dental practice aiming to enhance efficiency and patient satisfaction.

Conclusion

Concluding our exploration, it is clear that each patient's path, from their initial contact to establishing an enduring relationship with our specialty practice, is fundamental to providing exceptional dental care. Streamlining front desk operations is not just about efficiency; it is about optimizing every patient interaction to achieve a seamless, frictionless experience. This journey begins with a deep understanding of the patient's mindset, transcending mere inquiry to a thorough orchestration of front desk tasks, all while managing the unique complexities of specialty care.

Equally important is ensuring that we engage the referring doctor and their teams throughout the patient's journey. It is crucial to foster seamless communication, refer the patient back to the referring practice where appropriate, and share necessary records and information promptly. By empowering patients to continue their treatment journey with confidence, we honor the trust placed in us by the referring practice and ensure continuity of care that benefits all parties involved.

In specialist practices, establishing systems that empower our front desk staff to dedicate focused attention to new patient inquiries—and effectively collaborate with referring doctors and their teams—uplifts our capacity to make every patient feel genuinely valued from their very first interaction. Every detail matters in these practices, where the patient experience must be balanced with clinical expertise and team coordination.

Our role as specialists calls for continuous reflection and evaluation of each phase of the patient's journey, always seeking opportunities for improvement. Whether it involves modifying our approach to calls, enhancing engagement as patients arrive at the practice, or optimizing the extensive responsibilities at the front desk, every action taken to eliminate friction marks a step forward in improving patient satisfaction, as well as the success of the practice. Pursuing a frictionless patient experience is not merely a strategy—it is a core principle that offers us countless opportunities to demonstrate the values of our practice and our unwavering commitment to exceptional care.

To support this endeavor, a discussion guide accompanies this article. It serves as a valuable tool for navigating toward frictionless patient interactions, engaging your team, and integrating these best practices. As we move forward, future articles will delve deeper into perfecting the patient's arrival experience, as we continue our dedication to refining every touchpoint in patient care—driving toward a truly frictionless journey for our patients, our referring doctors, and our entire team.

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