

Practically Speaking: Catastrophic success

A young dentist with an overwhelmed staff in a busy practice misses signs of trouble.

By Ginny Hegarty

Dr. Smith (not his real name) was a year out of dental school when the death of his father left him the sole owner of a practice with a 30-year history in the community. Determined to build on his father's legacy, Dr. Smith took up the challenge to position the practice for success. His plans to grow the practice had already been set; an associate was hired and a marketing plan to attract new patients was in place.

Early on, things looked up, but the telephones were outrageously busy. So the doctor hired an administrative assistant, "Debbie." As is often the case in a busy practice, there was no time to train her, but he was confident the staff would bring Debbie up to speed.

A startling discovery

Six weeks later, Dr. Smith noticed that daily deposits were not keeping pace with production; he chalked it up to the frantic pace of the practice. Production was high, so collections would keep pace, right? Wrong. The A/R continued climbing over the next several months while the revenue dipped. Soon after, I was called in to consult.

I noticed that Debbie often answered calls by saying, "No, I'm sorry, we don't accept your insurance." I asked Debbie if these callers had HMO coverage, since the practice didn't participate with any HMOs. Debbie's answer was alarming: "No, the last three had Aetna or Prudential insurance."

When I asked why she thought the practice didn't accept traditional indemnity type plans, she went blank. The only thing Debbie knew about the practice's relationship with insurance were the details of their PPO and DMO plans. She didn't realize that she was turning away full-fee patients and only accepting reduced-fee patients.

Dr. Smith was shaken by the news. How many potential patients had been turned away? It all began to make sense; declining revenue was largely due to reduced fee schedules.

A star isn't born

Star employees aren't born—they're made. Debbie wasn't a bad employee; Dr. Smith's overwhelmed staff just didn't have time to train her. A positive attitude, a team-centered mentality and a willingness to understand and communicate the doctor's policies to patients are the result of careful training.

To help this team overcome its phone problems, I focused on using a scripting system to help the staff successfully communicate the practice's philosophies to patients. I also introduced easy rules for five-star phone service.

- Don't respond to a question with "I don't know." Instead, say, "That's a great

question, let me check into that and get back to you." The caller will appreciate your willingness to get them the information they need.

- Anyone can be your patient. When asked, "Do you participate with my insurance?" respond by saying, "We do accept most insurance while not participating with any. May I ask you a few questions about your insurance so we can see how you can best use your insurance in our office?"
- Listen to angry patients. Validate their concerns and let them know you want to help them. For example: "I'd be upset, too, if that happened to me; let me see how I can help you."
- When discussing fees or treatment, get their attention. Say, "May I have another moment of your time?" and then continue with, "I'd like to discuss the fee for your next visit and the payment options we have available."
- Don't encourage cancellations. When leaving a message, don't say, "If unable to make this appointment, please call us right away." Instead say, "We're looking forward to seeing you then."

We also used a telephone-skills development program (see author's bio) and combined mystery-shopper calls with taping of actual patient calls to help team members improve their communication skills.

Always put your best and most experienced people on the telephones. You deserve to have the peace of mind that your team understands your vision for your practice and can communicate it to your patients. And your staff deserves proper training to be their best.

Related Links: *Posted by dentalproducts.net. Originally published in the May 2005 Dental Practice Report. Copyright 1999-2004 Advanstar Dental Communications.*