

# Developing your patient experience

In the first of a three-part series, Laura shares how you can consistently deliver an experience that is true to your practice and its brand



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I've been using the term patient experience for well over 15 years now. The word 'experience' sits really comfortably with me. Many people use the term 'patient journey' but I believe it is the experience that we should be focusing on, not the journey.

Why? Journeys are boring, whereas experiences should be fantastic! Experiences should be positive and something that our patients want to tell everybody about. There are always areas in every practice that can be tweaked to boost the patient experience, so let's take a look at how.

## Who are you?

You have to be really clear about who you are as a practice. Michael and I like to use the

supermarket analogy for this, which works really well. One of the biggest stresses for practice owners, managers, and teams is that the practice might be more of an Aldi/Lidl type of business but they are trying to deliver a Waitrose experience.

If your brand message is Aldi, that is absolutely fine because every practice needs to be different. If you have a large NHS contract that makes up a good 90% of your income then you are going to be under more pressure to see more patients at a faster pace. However, that means the level of experience can't be as high when you're seeing 20 patients a day compared to five. Acceptance of this is something that is sometimes quite difficult for practice owners.

It is important for practices to know who they are and who their patient base is in order to then create the right brand message.

## Brand message

When it comes to developing your patient experience, the first thing to get right is your brand message. Once you know who you are,

you can then design your patient experience to match your brand. Consistency is key, your brand message has to be on point at all times, which can be extremely stressful if you haven't got this right in the first place.

Every practice, whatever their brand message, can develop their patient experience to support everybody in the practice, not just the patients. If you have ascertained that you are more Aldi, you can still enhance the experience you offer!

## Where do we start?

Patient feedback is really important, and every practice has to have it. Use it to your advantage by looking at what patients are saying in their comments about the practice. This is the perfect place to find out the areas where you can improve – patients see things with different eyes to you!

In addition, look at some statistics, such as how long are patients waiting, how often the dentists are running over, and overtime hours as a result of running over. Feedback and statistics are both great ways

of understanding the actual concerns within the patient experience and how you can then develop it. If, for example, you have dentists who are running over all the time, you need to look at why. Time keeping in itself can be one huge area to develop within the patient experience in every type of brand.

### In it together

Many people believe that developing the patient experience is about developing the front desk team. It is not. When you develop the patient experience it is about bringing everyone together as a team and not segregating or separating people. If you look at just one area, that team will feel as if they're not doing a great job and will take it as a negative. If you bring everyone together as a team to enhance every person's role you will end up with a much nicer atmosphere and a more cohesive team. It's important not to pigeonhole one area, it's all about teamwork.

### Back to basics

Sometimes adding extra finesse to the patient experience is about going back to basics and finetuning some of the small, everyday things that you do. It might be the way you meet and greet a patient, or the way that you give them forms.

It might just be about implementing systems so that everyone does things in the same way. You don't want three receptionists all doing a meet and greet in a different way, answering the phone in a different way, and explaining a deposit policy in a different way. Think about the things that you do that are great and how you can finetune them to make it a branded experience so that every patient gets the same, consistent experience from every person within your team.

### Time keeping

Do you have a situation where patients are always turning up late and you allow them to do so, which therefore means that the dentists are constantly running late? In this instance you can look at having a system whereby you implement clear cut off times that mean you don't see patients who arrive late.

Be proactive and call them the moment they haven't arrived and at this point you can tell them that unfortunately you are not going to be able to see them today and you will need to reschedule the appointment. Do this rather than letting them arrive late... once they are there it is very difficult and awkward to say no!

The front desk team have got to have the autonomy to deliver the process. To have this,

they need to have a documented system that everyone has agreed and they have got to be trained to deliver that system in a consistent manner.

If there is a situation where one clinician is running late, you need to sit down with them to find out what is happening and understand how you can support them. One of my biggest tips to dentists is this, don't just think about how long it takes you, clinically, everyone works at a slightly different pace. In addition, you also need to allow time for set up and turnaround so you do need to add additional time in to your appointments for this to happen. If you don't allow this, you may end up in situations where the nurse is then busy in the decontamination room instead of being in the surgery with the dentist.

### The handover

One of the most popular and needed areas in which to expand the patient experience is within something that we call the handover. This is essentially making sure that there is effective communication from the treatment room to the front desk, for every patient at every single appointment. This is a system that requires team training, discussion and really strong implementation.

In summary, the dentist will communicate everything to the patient while they are in the treatment room, including the fee, advice and recommendations with regard to home care, and what further appointments are required and why. In many practices, the patient then leaves the treatment room and goes to the front desk themselves; this is the point at which the confusion happens!

One way I like to think about this is ... when we have friends or family round for dinner or coffee, once they leave we don't stay in the kitchen or living room and allow them to walk themselves out of the front door. We get up, we thank them for coming over, we say goodbye, walk them to the front door, watch them drive away safely and give them a final wave. We put a lot of effort into saying goodbye to our friends and this is the level of experience we need to give our patients as well.

The clinician should always take the patient to the front desk and communicate with the team everything that has already been said to the patient, being mindful of confidentiality. There are simple ways around confidentiality, for example saying 'everything has gone as planned today' will translate to the front desk team that the filling the patient was booked in for has been carried out and the

## Top tip

Having your team on board to develop patient experience is crucial! One of my biggest recommendations is *Raving Fans* by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles; reading it and learning from it as a team will help you all to think differently about what you can do to offer a different experience. The aim is to get new patients from our existing patients more and more of the time, which is the biggest compliment you could ever hope to achieve.

fee on the booking system is what should be charged. Saying 'we need to schedule in two appointments two weeks apart' will be enough for your team member to know to look on the system and see, according to your notes, who to book in with. There is no need to openly discuss what treatment has gone ahead or why the future appointments are required. Done correctly, the handover itself protects confidentiality as it prevents the patient from saying openly 'I've had a filling today and I need to come back to see the oral health educator and hygienist' for everyone in the waiting room to hear.

### Reset date

In order to make sure everyone is 'on brand' and providing the experience you expect, they must be trained to provide it. Once you have created the system, carried out the training, and you and the team are confident in providing your experience, the next important thing is to pinpoint your 'reset date'. This is when you will begin to implement everything. The date has to be agreed by everyone and it has to be realistic. Understand that a larger practice with a bigger team won't be able to implement change as quickly as a practice with a four-strong team. However, pinpointing the reset is so important as it allows everyone to prepare for change and know that, from that date, you collectively shift up a gear with no going back! ♦

Laura Horton has worked in dentistry for 21 years and has an unrivalled passion and enthusiasm for treatment coordination, business and team development. In 2008 she left full-time practice management and has using her years of experience and vast amount of knowledge working with dental practices to help them successfully reach their true potential.