Marketing to the Full “Lifecycle” of Your Patient Engagement

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From first impression to lasting follow-through

In the past, we have discussed the importance of making a great first impression – and how to accomplish this. But what about follow-through? To be truly relational and to promote the healthiest interactions with patients means that you do not simply provide the care and then let any follow-ups go on auto-pilot. There is an art to the entire lifecycle of engaging with the patient. It is easy to become so wrapped up in the day-to-day busyness of your practice that you do not bother reviewing and adjusting your own practices and “hygiene” on this front. A simple yet consistent “audit” can bring to light potential shortfalls in communication or areas that have presented themselves as problems over time because the team may have simply become lackadaisical about “best practices.”

The importance of follow-up

Research published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine (JGIM)* suggests that the healthcare facility’s “mean follow-up time” plays a “statistically significant” role in one’s access and experience with care. Research substantiates what is generally suspected: the longer the delay in follow-up (or follow-through), the more degraded the quality and experience with care. A lack of responsive, respectful communication after a treatment or visit sends the wrong message and actually contributes to eroding all of the hard work you and your team have done on marketing and communications strategies. It certainly does not foster the trust essential for growing your business and retaining quality patients.

Brush up on best practices

Here, we lean into guidance from the Ottawa-based Canadian Medical Protective Association and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The following are steps in the right direction for crafting, revamping, and otherwise monitoring the "what happens *after* the appointment" side of the patient experience:

- To be responsive on this front, you need a stable foundation and framework. **Delegate** certain tasks to specific team members so that everyone knows their responsibilities and no important tasks get overlooked or delayed.
- To properly delegate, **create a list of the key tasks** associated with proper follow-ups. From there, ensure that each task has a staff person assigned to it. Make sure to let each person's talent shine by assigning tasks that match their strengths; for instance, some staff members may be better equipped to follow up on challenging cases or particularly sensitive matters.
- Ensure that you know how each patient prefers to be contacted. Be aware that some patients may not have the best or consistent online access, nor might they be particularly proficient or interested in online communications. So, ensure you have options catering to each **patient's resources and preferences**. At heart, reaching the intended recipient is imperative and a bare minimum. You do not want follow-ups to be missed simply because you are not "meeting the patient where they are at."
- In addition to listing tasks for follow-up, savvy owners and practice managers also list those patients with special needs for care, such as many competing diseases that require attention and "maintenance," as well as those quality patients who are most at risk of potentially leaving your practice. This can help prioritize **follow-ups,** too. A few examples might include patients with certain risk factors or who are challenged to get their disease under control, in addition to those who may have recently embarked on a new therapy or recently undergone a complex procedure.
- There is an art to **managing these follow-ups**. We always like to say that when you do not measure something, you cannot properly manage it. Be sure to establish systems and processes to schedule appropriate follow-ups, check those follow-ups

off the "list," and track any feedback or additional action steps that may be associated with each communication and patient engagement.

Marketing your extraordinary communications prowess and "after-care"

Your use of best practices and stellar performance on this front may be incorporated into your practice's broader marketing strategy. Your approaches to caring for and communicating with patients after their treatment or appointment can be a substantive source of content for marketing and communications in all its forms.

Consider engaging with loyal patients on testimonials that validate your skill and service and that specifically cover what your team did to keep in touch with patients after their appointments. Mind the little details. These little touches can mean so much. Even something as seemingly simple as a handwritten birthday card or a personal email message on the anniversary of a big oral milestone – such as a child's first "cavity-free" exam, the completion of a smile makeover, or the first anniversary of implants/full mouth reconstruction – can mean so much. Such marketing also serves the practical purpose of reminding patients to get back in the door for necessary exams, repairs, adjustments, and other ways to sustain the results from treatments. In this manner, their oral health does not fall by the wayside, and they do not fall back into those bad behaviours that resulted in the need for treatment in the first place!

Examples, instances, and quantitative ways to demonstrate your follow-through are worthy of being referenced on everything from your home page or "about us" section of your website to short posts on professional appreciation days that demonstrate your team's unique passion, and level of dedication and commitment to the art and science of genuinely caring and responsive dental care.

About the Author:

Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dentists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you're looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy

session with Naren. You may also schedule a session at your convenience with the Senior Director of Marketing – Lila, by clicking https://www.ekwa.com/msm/ or simply send a text to 313-777-8494.