

The Three Equations of Increased Treatment Acceptance

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There is a saying, “Life is a math equation. In order to gain the most, you have to know how to change the negatives into positives.” I’m not proposing that patients’ decision to accept, delay or decline care can be explained by a mathematical formula, but I’ve found that there are three equations that, when in proper balance, add up to increased treatment acceptance.

1) Experience > Expectations

Patients’ expectations are based on the sum of all their experiences, including all the times they’ve been to a dentist, restaurant, store, doctor, or have called the plumber or their insurance company. I believe people’s expectations are pretty low today because it seems, as a whole, consumers now experience more situations where they receive less than passionate, personal service. So, when exceptional service is delivered, it is noticed and appreciated.

The good news is being passionate about dentistry is easy. It is a vocation that can significantly and positively impact people. You can’t help but be passionate about patients and their experience at your practice when you truly believe you make a difference in people’s lives. And when you’re passionate about patients and the patient experience, it’s natural for you and your team to figure out ways you can add more value than any other dentist. Your systems, processes, communications, training and technology should focus on adding value for the patient; they are the center and purpose of everything you do. For example, think about how your team answers the telephone, which is the gateway through which all patients flow. Consumers today form an initial opinion, and initial expectations, based on the first 30 seconds of interaction. If your team is trained in the spirit of hospitality and if they are passionate about patients, they answer the phone not as an obligation but as an opportunity to serve.

“Mrs. Smith! It’s a great day at Miller Family Dentistry. How can I help you smile today?”

The practice must foster a culture of pride, passion and hospitality. When you have this mindset, not only do your patients thoroughly enjoy their time in your practice, but your team will, too.

When considering making a purchase, the perceived value of an item or service needs to be greater than the cost or people are not likely to buy. When it comes to dentistry, patients need to have a clear understanding of what's happening in their mouth. If there is no discomfort, patients often don't feel they have a problem that needs to be solved, therefore they don't value the diagnosis. Using visual aids that enable patients to literally "see" the issues with their teeth can be very beneficial. Asking questions that confirm patients understand their oral problem, the clinical solution, and consequences of inaction will help your team determine if patients truly understand the value of treatment.

All patients have a "core value," which is what matters most to them apart from the clinical aspects of dentistry. To find out a patient's core value, you simply need to ask.

"Mrs. Smith, what's most important to you about your oral health and the dental care you would like to receive?"

"Well, I'm pretty busy; I work and have three kids. So I don't have a lot of time for dental visits."

This question and the subsequent answer will help the team identify the patient's core values, which typically are related to five specific things: money, time/convenience, quality, comfort or relationships. The next question identifies the rules in which this patient has for that core value. A follow up question would be, "I understand that time is extremely valuable to you. Would you mind sharing with me what has to happen in order for you to feel we have valued your time?" This patient might reply by saying, "I would love to be seen on time and, if possible, to have all my care done in as little visits as possible." Once you have identified the patient's core values and their rules, you can then identify what your practice can offer that aligns with the patient's most important wants. In Mrs. Smith's case, it is time. So, when you present recommended treatment, you would explain the clinical and health value of the dentistry, but also detail how the technology you have in your practice will enable Mrs. Smith to enjoy one-day crowns, minimizing her time investment at the practice.

"Mrs. Smith, as you know, I'm recommending we put crowns on two of your teeth that have cracks. I've showed you on the monitor how serious this issue is and shared with you my concerns that if you don't take care of this now, one or both may break and not only cause discomfort but additional expense. You indicated you want to get this taken care of, but also mentioned time is very valuable to you. The good news is we have technology that will enable us to do your crowns in just one visit so we don't interrupt your work schedule or take too much time away from your family."

Theodore Roosevelt said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” This is especially true in dentistry. Dentists and their teams have to make sure the patient knows that you care about them and that you really, really care about getting the patient healthy. In addition to delivering an exceptional experience that centers around the patient and providing value, here are a few ways you can **let patients know your goal is to care for them, not treat them:**

- Always use the word “care” instead of “treatment.”
- Always make care as easy as possible. This may mean being available for appointments beyond traditional work hours or offering financing solutions.

“Mrs. Smith, the cost for your two crowns is \$1,025 after applying what your insurance will contribute to your care. We accept cash, checks, credit cards and we do have special financing with CareCredit. We never want the cost of care to cause a patient to delay care. Your oral health means too much to us.”

- Always follow up with patients after their appointment.
- Always keep great notes in the patient’s file. Know who their family is, key dates and important events in their lives.
- Always, always, always show appreciation. A simply “thank you for choosing our practice as your dental home” can go a long way.

When you add it all up — delivering a great patient experience that exceeds expectations, providing value that exceeds cost and showing patients you’re more interested in caring for them than treating them — it equals patients who accept recommended care and become long-term, loyal patients.



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