

World-class Service

How to Learn from Good and Bad Experiences

Nearly every dentist has developed a unique way of providing dental services. How we approach caring for our patients is often at least partially based on our learned experiences of service from our past. Whether it was information passed from a parent to a child, a partner to an associate, or via dental school, books, and seminars, we all develop our personal style of delivering care and managing our practices.

And though we have developed this unique style, most—if not all—of us always look for ways upon which to improve our delivery of services. We seek out new, updated equipment and techniques and attempt to create a more inviting dental office environment to improve the quality of patient care. Many times we focus on products that we believe our patients will appreciate and those that we think will set us apart from the competition in their minds. However, it is interesting that we often view the “competition” as neighboring dental practices in the community.

Consider this: Our competition is probably more often the other “feel good” services and products that are constantly advertised on television. Wouldn't you rather take your kids to Walt Disney World® than undergo an expensive dental procedure? If you think about Walt Disney World in simple terms, it's a theme park with live stuffed animals that hug your kids, very clean restaurants with expensive hamburgers, thrilling rides, fireworks, and other amusements.

If Disney marketed their products in the same way we approach dentistry, it would go something like this, “We have a very clean theme park and provide you with the highest level of quality and safety on our rides. Our food is prepared on OSHA-quality ovens to prevent any transmission of unwanted bacteria. In an effort to offer the most updated shows and rides, our staff attends continuing education frequently. When you choose us, you can be assured you will enjoy your visit.” Would that get you to the entrance gates? Is this how you've been marketing your dental practice?

I think we can all agree that, in this case, Disney would have difficulty encouraging many financially-struggling parents to part with their hard-earned money to visit a clean park with safe rides and interesting shows. Disney clearly understands people like to spend money on two things: *good feelings* and *solutions to problems*. Its marketing approach appeals on our emotions—connect with your family again, create a lifetime memory you and your family will always share, and so forth. And how does Disney create this environment? By providing world-class service! It feels good to be there, and, more importantly, Disney makes it easy for us to want to spend our money there.

The fact that Disney has achieved this high level of customer service, despite the young ages of many of its team members, is amazing. Clearly it invests a great deal in training team members and monitoring the customers it serves to assess satisfaction.

But how does all of this relate to your office? Last we heard, dental schools don't place much emphasis on training team members or on explaining what great service is and how to provide it. Schools and professors have their hands full just teaching basic clinical skills. If you want your team to be able to provide world-class service, you need to first learn about it yourself and then teach them.

How can patient service be learned?

Because of its price tag, world-class service cannot be offered to everyone. Therefore, not everyone has experienced world-class service. But you can teach staff members how to provide world-class experiences for your patients, even if staff members have not personally experienced such services themselves. There are several viable options for helping you to help your team create a “world-class” service for your patients.



Great Idea No. 1: The Starbucks® Experience. Named both after a business book and a workshop we offer, the Starbucks Experience provides fundamental principles about service over and above the norm. Best of all, it costs very little to take the team for a field trip to a local Starbucks. Buy team members a drink, a muffin, or a cookie and take the time to stay in the establishment to soak up the atmosphere. It is best to go at a time of day when the shop isn't busy—after the morning rush or in the afternoon. Go back to the office and discuss what the team noticed. Ask your team questions like:

- 1 What did you notice about the environment? (Ask about sight, sound, smells, and décor.)
- 2 What sort of approaches did Starbucks take toward customer service that we could implement with our patients?
- 3 What made the experience unique?
- 4 What made it different than just going to another coffee shop for a cup of coffee?

After discussion, apply what your team has learned and discuss how you can implement some of these ideas into the practice.

Great Idea No. 2: Purchase at least one current book about providing outstanding customer service for yourself and for your staff members. There are many great books available about creating exceptional and unique customer service. Splurge and buy one of these books, such as *Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service*, by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles, or any other book you find particularly motivating, and give a copy to each staff member to read. Then, plan a book review, assigning chapters or content to staff members for presentation to the group. Hold one or more staff meetings to discuss the book, as well as ways in which the team can help you to implement some of the ideas they discovered in the book.

Some practices actually hold "book report meetings." Consider doing the same in your practice and have a meeting every couple of months during which a team member will report on a book. Based on the report, you and your team can brainstorm ways in which you can improve your service.

Great Idea No. 3: Take them shopping at a high-end department store, either a local one or a large chain. This may sound expensive, but we suggest that you give your team members some spending money, with the requirement that they must spend all of the money at the store and report the details of their experience. Learning occurs best when experienced firsthand, and this will be an experience they won't forget.

After the trip, ask each staff member to talk about every aspect of the experience, and then brainstorm with the group about how the things that they loved the most could be implemented in the practice.

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Great Idea No. 4: Take the team out for a "Day of Differences." The best time to really understand how good world-class service occurs is directly after experiencing bad service. Try taking the entire team to breakfast at a local fast food restaurant with a reputation for bad customer service. Have a short meeting at the restaurant and note what the team observed about the experience. Then, take your team to a high-end store and let them shop. Afterward, meet for lunch in a nice restaurant. Ask your team members to think about the breakfast experience while they eat lunch and compare the two experiences. Apply the ideas they offer to the practice and tell them to remember how it felt to experience both bad service and exceptional service.

Great Idea No. 5: Discuss each staff member's good and bad customer service experiences. There's no spending money required for this one! Ask each staff member to write down details of both good and bad service experiences they've had, including at physicians' offices, and then allow time for team members to share their experiences with the other staff members, noting similarities and contrasts. Give each team member plenty of time to reflect and share with everyone else.

Learning occurs best when having fun!

Coaches, consultants, and speakers know that stories and shared experiences are the most effective ways to teach. We have to *feel* in order to learn

and retain information. When your team members have the opportunity to see firsthand how valuable they feel when they are receiving world-class customer service, they will understand the need for—and want to offer—the same spirit of care to your patients. ♦



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