

More Patients, Please

Asking for—and Receiving—Quality Referrals

Our last column addressed simple things that can be incorporated into your daily office routine to keep patients feeling special in your practice. We also have addressed the new patient process and how to subsequently cement the doctor-patient relationship after these patients have become a part of your practice. Now, let's talk about how you can use these relationships to build more patient referrals and to attract the kind of patients you want—those who will help you build the practice of your dreams!

In previous articles, we showed you how to create and build a fabulous first impression, which begins the value-building process for all of the people who the patient will refer to you. First impressions grow exponentially because of two very important reasons. First, if you impress new patients with your service level, skill, and communication abilities, and you bolster that impression at each of the patient's continuing appointments, then your patient will build a far better referral story about you than you could ever create. Second, your next new patient is already conditioned from the referral to hold your services

in high regard. This is the major reason referral patients readily accept treatment.

You can create the patient base you desire by determining which of your existing patients you should ask for referrals, and deciding *how* to ask them. While you must consistently work toward building referrals to your practice, it benefits you to choose the right patients and to ask them at the best possible time.

Every practice has a core group of great patients. Among this group of patients, there are always people who are "influencers" in their community. These patients are active in their community and socialize in the kind of groups that bring you the client base you want. They may be people whose opinions are particularly valued or people who have great networking skills. We all make purchasing choices based on referrals. The impact of the value of the reference often will depend on how you feel about the person who gave you that referral. Pay attention to the influencers in your practice and ask them in unique ways for their references.

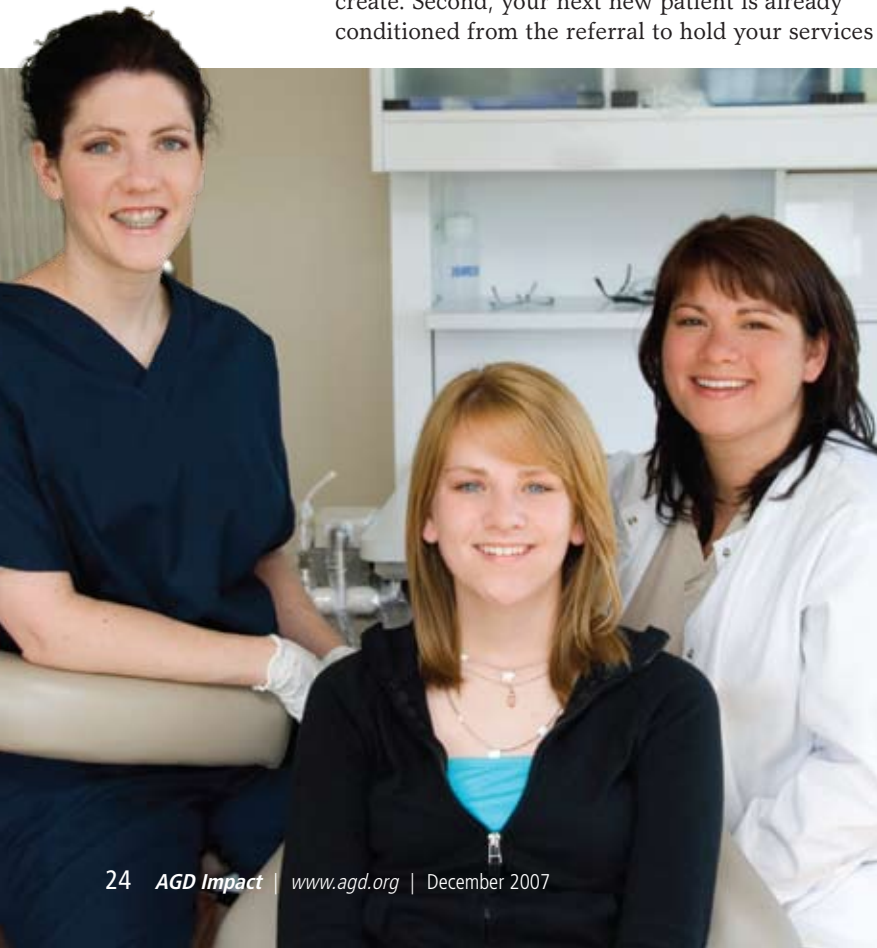
Do you have a morning huddle every day? From the charts you reviewed the day before, pick the patients from whom you will ask for a referral and discuss your choices in your morning meeting. If you don't plan this process, it probably will not occur. Don't let a day go by without taking some small step toward building your patient base through your interactions with your patients that day. If you ask 10 people per week, and one of them refers a patient that year, you will welcome approximately 48 new patients into your practice each year! It takes time to build your referral tree, but consistency will bring you success.

Asking for referrals: A tricky tactic

When is it a good time to ask for a referral? How about at the end of a great case when your patient is thrilled about his or her results? Or, consider asking a patient who had a difficult experience in a previous practice and is now doing well clinically in your practice.

Timing and the way you ask for referrals both count mightily! How does your treatment stand out? Remember the story from our September 2007 column about the incident in the grocery store? Can your patients tell that kind of story about you?

According to Bill Cates, a prominent referral coach in the sales community, there are three keys



to asking for referrals:

- Serve patients before you sell them.
- Plant seeds that you are building your business from referrals.
- When the rapport is good, ask patients directly for referrals.

So how do you ask for a referral? Directly and comfortably. Be fully present and confident in your request. The more confident you are, the more confident your clients will be when they recommend you to their families and friends. Phrases and scripting are not nearly as important as maintaining direct eye contact, smiling, being aware of your body posture, and speaking in calm tones. Don't be too hurried or your request will be ineffective. Ask sincerely, graciously, and compassionately.

At the end of your appointments, ask your patients, "By the way, we are interested in how we can better serve our patients. Would you mind answering a couple of questions for me?" Ask your patients, "If you were referring a family member or friend, what would you say about our practice?" Wait and let your patient think. When he or she answers, ask more questions and get specific information. Be inquisitive and interested, and pay careful attention. The information you will get from your patient is gold! In essence, your patient will be telling you about the person he or she will refer and sharing possible concerns.

Also, consider asking, "If there was something we could do differently that would improve our service, what would it be?" Listen attentively and note your patient's response. If he or she doesn't have any ideas, ask, "Would you do me a favor? If you think of anything, will you call me personally and share your thoughts?" Always hand your patient your card.

If you'd like more feedback, consider some of these questions:

- "Is there anything about our practice that would keep you from referring your family and friends?"
- "Is there anything we could do differently that would make you want to refer more patients to us?"
- "If you know anyone who you think might get value from the kind of service we provide, would you consider passing our information along to them?"
- "It sounds like you are very pleased with the benefits of the comfort and confidence you are enjoying with your new appearance. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction to see how positively this has impacted your life. Would you mind passing my name on to other people you know who might want the same benefits you have received?"

Sometimes we can plant the seed before we ask for referrals. This can be accomplished by interjecting statements during a new patient consultation or recare visit. The following statements would be useful for planting the seed:

- "I want to earn the right to have you as a patient for many

years to come, as well as the opportunity to serve your family and friends. Please share with me what I need to know to serve you better."

- "Sometimes, when I go through this restoration process with others, they begin to think of other people they believe should know about the services we have to offer. In some cases, because of sensitive appearance issues, they just don't know how to share this information with the other person. If this problem has occurred to you, please let me know, and we can discuss the best way for you to introduce us."

Remember, the quantity and quality of referrals to your practice is the direct result of:

- Your persistence in creating enough time to ask for referrals regularly.
- Your relationships with your existing patients. Happy patients eagerly refer other future happy patients.

Say thank you!

Tirelessly thank your patients for sending you referrals. If your patient refers a new patient to you, it should be a pleasurable experience. Craft a personally written thank-you note or send a gift at the time a newly referred patient

schedules his or her first appointment. Don't wait for the new patient to come in. You are showing appreciation for the spirit of the referral, not the actual appointment.

Keep thank-you gifts in your office so they are available during a busy day. Some good ideas are gift certificates for car washes, restaurants, movies, coffee houses, or, maybe even delivering a home-cooked meal or pizza for a busy mom. Think about being a standout. Consider calling a patient personally and thanking him or her yourself!

The most important part of building a successful, referral-based practice is to be the kind of dentist and person who deserves the kind of referrals you want. Are you the kind of dentist your patients hope you are? ♦



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