

Front Desk Success

The top 4 improvements your front desk can make to get you more new patients

Editor's note: Practice training and consulting company Scheduling Institute created the 5-Star Scheduling System, a system that helps practices increase their number of new patients. Over the course of a month, the Scheduling Institute's team of trainers collectively visits about 400 offices and listens in on thousands of patient calls. We asked them to weigh in on some of the most typical areas they see offices need to improve to start getting more new patients.

The importance of the front desk

Overall, one of the most eye-opening realizations doctors wake up to is how much they're undervaluing their front desk—especially when it comes to getting new patients. Until dentists focus on it and see the improvements that follow, they can't believe they had overlooked something so fundamental yet so important.

And in most cases, until someone from outside the practice points it out by offering proof, they've never considered how the front desk handles new patients as vital to their overall success. Basically, they don't know what they don't know.

Think about it: The front desk represents the first few "touch points" for the new patient, both over the phone and in the office. It's hugely responsible for setting the tone and shaping the patient's impression of every other aspect of the practice, including the doctor(s), other staff and treatments.

Look at it from the patient's perspective. Who enjoys calling a doctor's office? It's not exactly something most people look forward to and they approach it with some apprehension and, often, anxiety. Imagine what it would be like for patients if your front desk totally turned their expectations around with an easy, welcoming experience from the start. Chances are, it's the beginning of a long-term patient relationship.

Having a front desk that can correctly handle new patient interactions gives your office a competitive advantage and sets you up for the growth you've been looking for. To help you get started, here are four improvements your front desk can start implementing right now.

1 Uncomplicate the conversation.

A common tendency is to throw too much information at new patients when they first call in—the misconception being the more information provided, the better. We call this “verbal vomit.” In reality, juggling too many topics has the potential to put up barriers and make the process more difficult. Your front desk should understand that the only need the patient is looking to fulfill with the initial call is to schedule an appointment—that’s it. There’s no reason to cover clinical issues or attempt to diagnose; that’s the doctor’s job and it is unethical for the front desk to do over the phone. The same goes for in-depth insurance matters, which should all be moved to when the patient is in the office.

Many patients might already be nervous or uneasy about going to the dentist, so flooding the conversation with medical or insurance jargon won’t make them feel any better.

The bottom line: Be sure any questions and concerns are addressed, but stress to your front desk to keep the conversation focused on scheduling the appointment. All those other topics can be covered once the patient is in the office. Remember, the initial call is the patient’s introduction to your practice. So make sure your front desk has a system in place that allows it to set the appointment while making patients feel at ease and as welcomed as possible.

2 Take the lead.

When handling new patient calls, the front desk team needs to be assumptive in its approach and take control of the conversation. For example, there’s no need to ask patients if they “want” to schedule an appointment. Why else would they be calling? Instead, assume as much and propel the conversation forward accordingly. This helps avoid awkward exchanges filled with dead space and ensures the mutual goal of the call is accomplished, which is to get patients scheduled.

A great way to help your front desk with this is by providing a basic conversation template for new patient calls. This way the team has something to help guide smooth interactions. And to be clear, this has nothing to do with reciting scripted or canned responses—it’s about the front desk team members being prepared to do their job well and get you more new patients on the schedule.

3 Confirm and commit.

It's essential for the front desk to confirm the appointment specifics with new patients before ending the call. This helps reduce the number of no-shows that occur because of miscommunications over logistics such as day and time. To increase the likelihood of a kept appointment even more, the front desk should also have the patient *commit*. This is a simple yet powerful tool that helps create a sense of urgency and importance around keeping the appointment and arriving on time.

Gaining a commitment can be accomplished like this: "Mrs. Smith, the doctor and our team have reserved [day and time] for you. We look forward to seeing you then. Should an emergency arise will you call me, Sally, and let me know at least 48 hours in advance?"

Make sure it's posed as a question, because that's a key element of why it's so effective. A question that forces callers to answer evokes the "law of commitment," which means they're more likely to follow through with something after giving a verbal promise.

4 Proactively seek out referrals.

The front desk is in a prime position to ask for new patient referrals, but there's typically a lot of missed opportunity. Often, it's not that the team members don't want to ask—they just don't know when or how. But it's a shame to work so hard to overdeliver and provide an awesome experience for your patients, only to miss golden chances to gain referrals for new ones.

These missed chances can be reduced by advising your front desk—as well as your entire staff—to always ask for a referral whenever a patient gives the practice a compliment, because a compliment is basically the patient giving a "green light" to ask for a referral. This may seem obvious, but you'd be surprised how many compliments go unleveraged upon check-in and checkout. Plus, there can be no assuming that just because patients give a compliment, they'll automatically send family and friends your way. The entire team needs to actively listen and ask. When they do ask, they should convey how important referrals are to the practice. This will help provide a sense of urgency to the request.

3 'Big-Picture' Improvements Needed to Grow Your Practice

1 Evaluate everything in your practice through the lens of the patient.

What kind of patient experience does your practice provide? Not only the front desk, but your office as a whole? It can be difficult to accurately answer this question without really putting yourself in the patients' shoes and seeing the experience from their perspective. Many times, this has a lot to do with a change in mindset and accepting that you're in not just the medical or health business but the people business as well. Considering both the clinical and psychological aspects of the patient experience will be essential to growing your practice.

2 Communicate value.

Once new patients come in for their first visit, do you give them great reasons to stay with you? This is about conveying more than just the clinical benefits of the treatments you offer—any dental office can do that. What will really separate you from other practices is communicating why the patients should care. For example, regular hygiene visits are not just essential for good oral health, but they also can help prevent the need for more invasive and expensive procedures in the future. (And for cosmetic treatments such as whitening, the benefits of having a fresh, confident smile.)

3 Track new-patient referrals.

A great way to gauge your patient experience is by tracking how many new patients come from referrals. This basically gives you a score card. For example, if you're finding that only 20 percent of new patients come from referrals, that means only two out of every 10 patients feel the need to recommend you to family and friends.

You should have a minimum of 60 percent of new patients coming from referrals, and a target of 80 percent. If you're in this range, it's safe to say you're providing a top-notch experience that impresses patients so much that they go out of their way to recommend you, and your team is asking for referrals. But there's always room for improvement! Because remember, if you have a high referral rate, it provides a constant flow of new patients without spending a dime on external marketing.