Scheduling is only one system in your dental practice that will create success. Blocking the New Patient and Dental Hygiene Appointments are an important piece to increasing your profitability!

The Art of Scheduling Success

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Table of Contents

The Art of Continuing Care in Your Dental Practice pg. 2

Get Your Dental Practice on Schedule pg. 7

About the President of Dental Practice Solutions pg. 10
The Art of Continuing Care in Your Dental Practice

How do you currently communicate the importance of optimal oral health to your patients? When you understand how to communicate to your patients so they understand you will have happy and healthy patients. This means job security to the employees and increased revenue for the business owner. Preventive care and periodontal maintenance appointment scheduling need to be an important source of success for your dental practice.

Preventive care and periodontal maintenance appointment scheduling may be the most important source of success for your dental practice. But not every practice knows how to fully tap this goldmine. Filling your schedule with future dental hygiene appointments is an art that requires a daily system — and forming some new habits — but once learned, it’s a system that will make your dental hygiene department rock-solid.

Keep Your Schedule Rockin’ With Pre-Blocking

The most effective way to keep the hygiene schedule full is to, number one, pre-block it. This means blocking out specific timeframes in your schedule for specific kinds of visits. For example, how many hours each day do you need for new patient exams? Do you block a specific time on your daily schedule to see New Patients, Patients for Big Restorative/Cosmetic Dental Cases, Pediatric Patients, Scaling and Root Planing appointments? Include more time to chart important screening exams if you don’t have a hygiene assistant to document, and remember to allow 10 minutes for breaking down the room, disinfecting, and setup. Best profitability and a time saving-tip are to have another auxiliary available to do this simple, yet important task.

The goal of pre-blocking appointments is to keep the hygiene schedule full and to be productive — so that each day brings in the optimal amount of hygiene revenue. Holes in the schedule lead to a domino effect of patients not returning for maintenance care, and the dentist will see openings in the treatment schedule in the very near future.

Tip: Have the dental hygienist or hygiene assistant schedule future dental hygiene appointments. They are the auxiliary who understands the purpose of the next visit and how much time needs to be allotted for the patient’s next visit.

So, setting up a pre-blocked or tiered schedule is key, but that’s not your only step for successfully scheduling preventive care (Dental Hygiene) appointments. Now you need to make sure that ALL patients make an appointment for their next dental visit. What’s the point of pre-blocking the patient time if you don’t fill the appointment slots, with the correct type of patient treatment?
Postcards Only Get You So Far

Now the question is, how do you get those patients on the schedule for their next visit(s)? Many years ago, it was considered the standard of care to have a patient complete a postcard. This would be mailed to the patient when it was time to call in for their next hygiene appointment. Most dental offices have since discovered this method to not only be passive and impersonal, but fairly unsuccessful. Offices that use this type of recall system will lose about 60-70% of their current dental hygiene continuing care patients.

Offices that have patients call to reschedule appointments find many openings in their hygiene schedules. People are very busy in the 21st century, and they will put off calling their dental office if they have to call to schedule their future appointments. The good news is that technology in this 21st century allows people to manage their calendars from the palm of their hand. We can lock in appointments on our hand-held device and we even have pop-up reminders which occur months, days, and even minutes in advance.

Now all you have to do is get the dental appointments on the calendar. Your highest success rate occurs while the patient schedules their next appointment while they are the dental office and before he/she leaves the office. Better to have the patient walk away with a date and time than to hope that he/she calls the office for the next appointment.

It’s All in How You Ask

Are you using a call-in type of continuing care system? Usually a patient declines to schedule an appointment because he/she was asked a closed-ended question (where the answer is either yes or no). Take a look at these three different questions:

1) “Mr. Jones, would you like to schedule your next cleaning with me?”

2) “Mr. Jones, when you would like to schedule your next cleaning appointment?”

3) “Mr. Jones, I can see you on Wednesday July 6th or Thursday July 7th for your next continuing care appointment. Which day works best for you?”
The first sentence is a closed-ended question. It allows the patient to say “No” very easily. The patient may forget to call back in 3 or 6 months.

The second question is better but still allows room for the patient to say “No” to an appointment. It also allows the patient to be in charge of the appointment book. You are the professional, and you are the one in charge of the schedule. You understand the patients’ needs and you know what is available on the office’ schedule.

The third question suggests, without question, that the patient will be coming back, and h/she already understands the importance of why he/she will be returning. There are no questions to be asked. The patient already has bought into his/her treatment plan and understands the importance of regular preventive care.

See what a huge difference a few tweaks in your wording can make? The significance of excellent verbal skills will help to implement a successful continuing care system and book your hygiene schedule months in advance!

Choose Your Words Wisely

There’s still more to say about the power of your words. When scheduling the hygiene appointment, avoid using words such as “cleaning” and “recall.” The perception among patients is that a “recall” appointment is not significant. After all, you are not “recalling” the patient. Have you heard of a recall on a car with a problem? This is nothing similar to what you are doing in your dental office. The dentist is not “recalling” the patient back into the practice to check whether they need a cleaning or tune-up. You are inviting patients back for preventive care.

Likewise, asking a patient to return for a “cleaning” is like asking to have your house cleaned — anyone can do it. This image runs counter to today’s hygienists, who are considered preventive care professionals and non-surgical periodontal therapists. We need to add value to the dental hygiene appointment by using words such as preventive care appointment, continuing care, and periodontal maintenance. Nix the word cleaning.

Seal the Deal in Your Farewell

Every patient should be dismissed with a verbal reminder that there is another appointment, even if it is six months away. Create a perception of value and importance in the mind of the patient by saying something like, “Mrs. Smith, I look forward to seeing you in July, and I want to hear more about your daughter’s wedding. See you at your preventive care appointment December 6th, and I will recheck that one area I was concerned about on the lower left side.”
Try to ask the patient to come back at a time similar to the one he/she is currently scheduled for. Many people work best if they have consistent times for certain appointments. For example: dental, psychologist, chiropractic, etc. Also, some patients want afternoon dental appointments and some prefer them first thing in the morning. People also better remember their appointments when there is continuity and consistency. Tip: For younger patients always try to schedule before the noon time hour.

Of course, you will provide the patient with a written reminder with the next date written on a card along with Doctors name, hygienists name and all the important office information.

**Try an Easier Way to Contact Stragglers**

Even with excellent verbal skills and a well-oiled machine of utilizing a pre-blocked schedule, you will still have some unscheduled patients. You know the drill: Each month someone has the daunting task of running the continuing care report and calling patients who need to have an appointment. One lucky auxiliary is in charge of creating the list of overdue and patients who are due but not scheduled for their hygiene appointment. Then they spend numerous hours chasing down these people who have long forgotten about a dental appointment. And if they are thinking—"It’s only a cleaning" — **Good Luck** educating them **NOW** that this is an important appointment to schedule sooner than later!

Before any calls can be made, research has to be completed regarding when the last hygiene appointment occurred, the patient's periodontal health, areas of concern, if there's outstanding treatment, what insurance allows, what x-rays are needed, the length of the appointment needed, any outstanding balances, etc. All patient phone numbers must be called and messages left at each number. Maybe one in twenty patients will answer the phone, let alone schedule an appointment. This becomes monotonous and very time consuming.

The good news: Now, you understand the systematic approach of pre-appointing patients, which is much more efficient and productive. And that means a lot less patients to track down the hard way. But if you are stuck with making those calls, try this: Some offices have late evening schedules. Why? Statistics prove that it is easier to reach patients by phone between the hours of 5 p.m. and 8 pm. Even if your office only stays open late once in a while, you can use this time to call the stragglers — and get a better response rate when you call later in the day. Some offices even have Saturday appointments. This is another great time to make these calls.
Never Say Never

Despite your best efforts, you’ll find a handful of patients who won’t immediately commit to a future dental hygiene appointment. Until those patients have a feeling of urgency to schedule or else, they may not change their behavior. Once patients understand the importance of preventing disease and understand that calling a week before they are due for their preventive care appointment can mean they have to wait for an appointment until they are a month overdue, they may never change their behavior. Urgency key to keeping your patient appointments scheduled in a timely manner! Once the patient understands how important their oral health is to their overall health, they are more likely to ask to schedule a next appointment.

Some patients may live in another country or state and don’t know when they’ll be back in the area. It is very valuable to recommend that these patients have another dental hygienist see them for their preventive care during the interim of their next visit to your area. This is just one more exception to this strategy for success.

But the above setbacks don’t have to keep you from being proactive. When patients do fall through the cracks, the best method to have them return is to call them on the phone. When the correct “continuing care” program is in place, the hygiene schedule will be full. This keeps the practice in touch with its patients and increases patient retention dramatically.

Bottom line, preventive care and periodontal maintenance appointments must be communicated in a manner that will allow patients to understand the importance of preventing disease. When patients understand that without good oral health they will not have good overall health they will listen and take action.

This approach will create a WIN for everyone!
Get Your Dental Practice on Schedule

It’s About Time

Sweet and very simple: scheduling is about time. When your schedule and the patient time is well managed, you enjoy happy patients, less stress for you, the team and outstanding profit potential becomes your gift! Days at the office become more enjoyable for all. That means improved team morale which ultimately reduces turnover of your patients and the employees.

Every successful dental practice has a strategic scheduling system in place!

Your scheduling system is only one of your practice systems that should include a step-by-step series of targets that drive your practice’ performance.

Four Necessary Steps to Build a More Efficient Scheduling System:

- Create a schedule template
  - What does a perfect day look like?
  - Consider procedures you want to see and at what time during each day
  - Consider when new patients should be seen each day
  - Consider when small children should be seen during the day
- Establish your ideal day and perfect (ideal) production target
- Annually conduct procedural time studies

1: Create Your Perfect Day Template

In general each day should have a similar flow, a smooth feel and you feel the harmony. Your schedule needs to achieve the daily production goal, or it is unlikely that the practice will reach its annual production goals. I recommend that you schedule larger, more productive cases in the morning when you and your team are energized. The daily targets I recommend are:

- 65% of daily production should be completed in the morning and this time should be focused on higher-end procedures
- 35% in the afternoon, with the focus being on minor procedures, consults and emergencies.

2: Establish Your Perfect Day and Your Production Goals

By January of each year you should have set your goals for the year. On the first day that you work each year, know how many days you will need to work each year and what the daily goal needs to be to reach your annual gross profits and how you can increase your revenue. The easiest way to achieve a desired annual production is to schedule an average daily level of production that will achieve that annual goal. For example, if you want to produce $800,000.00 USD, working 200 days, you need to target $4,000.00 USD in
production per day. There is no way that you can predict your realistic daily production but it is the daily average that is important.

When you create your perfect days schedule and anticipated daily production goals, you are most likely able to reduce the stress in your dental practice because this will allow you and the team to achieve a consistent workload each day.

I encourage the clients of Dental Practice Solutions to schedule approximately the same production each day so that the practice is well paced and it will create balance.

3: Create New Patient Time

New patients are your key to continually increasing practice production. This is one necessary aspect of maintaining a profitable dental practice no matter how large you believe your practice is nor how long you have been in practice. A 10% Attrition is considered normal even for the more successful dental practices. By setting up specific blocks of time in the schedule, your practice can now accommodate new patients quickly and efficiently. The goal for scheduling new patients once they have called your office to schedule an appointment is within 7-10 days. This is when their motivation and interest are high. Imagine the time you had a first date. Were you excited to meet that special someone? This is exactly how you want your new patients to feel about coming to your office for their “first date”. And the hope is that you and the team are excited to meet the new patients just as well. A significant amount of the doctor production should be generated from new patients. Not only is new patient production a must but it is essential for a dental practice to be successful!

4: Annual Studies and Strategic Planning

Setting up strategic planning sessions and reviewing your system studies are an important methodology to examine.

Steps to Accomplish Annual Studies:

1. Identify and list the services that equal 80% of office production scheduled each day
2. List the top 4 procedures
   a. Keep a separate record for the doctor and the assistant to determine exactly the time needed for the 80% of your listed services
3. Average the time of the four procedures to determine how much time is needed per procedure
   a. Take or give 10% of your estimated time necessary
4. Adjust the schedule accordingly to accurately reflect the time needed for each procedure
Targets

1. Schedule all new patients for consults within seven days of their 1st call to your office
2. Confirm 100% of appointments 48 hours in advance via cell phone, text or email
   a. Ask patients on their 1st phone call to the office how they prefer to be contacted
3. Schedule patients within 7 - 10 days out once treatment is accepted
   a. When patients neglect to schedule for treatment make a note to follow up with a call the next business day
4. Assess what you can do to decrease no-shows and last minute cancellations to 1%

Conclusion

Our team of experts at Dental Practice Solutions recommends that you set up a series of targets which will motivate the team and increase your practice profitability. When you implement these strategies and the above mentioned key scheduling, you will find that your dental practice experiences consistent growth, even during challenging economic times.

By implementing these recommendations, you can create a more efficient and effective scheduling system that leads to streamlined productivity, greater profitability and reduced stress. Successful systems and targets will drive the success and profits in your dental practice in many years to come!
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Debra Seidel-Bittke, RDH, BS, is an international speaker, author and one of Dentistry Today’s 2012 Leaders in Dental Consulting. She is president of Dental Practice Solutions, a dental practice management business specializing in patient-centered solutions, uncovering hidden office potential and maximizing profits. DPS touches dental practices worldwide with its top-notch consulting and has most recently debuted a one-of-a-kind, online comprehensive coaching program for dental teams. This step-by-step program is designed to give dental practices an “extreme makeover,” jumpstarting improvements in finances, teamwork, productivity, and more. Ms. Seidel-Bittke, seamlessly combines her sharp knowledge of the latest dental hygiene science, financial savvy and her knack for solving the toughest dilemmas of the dental team to put even the most struggling dental practices on the fast track to success. To learn how you can unlock your practice’s potential, email Ms. Seidel-Bittke at info@dentalpracticesolutions.com. In US and Canada call toll-free, 1-888-816-1511 or outside US and Canada call: 503-970-1122

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