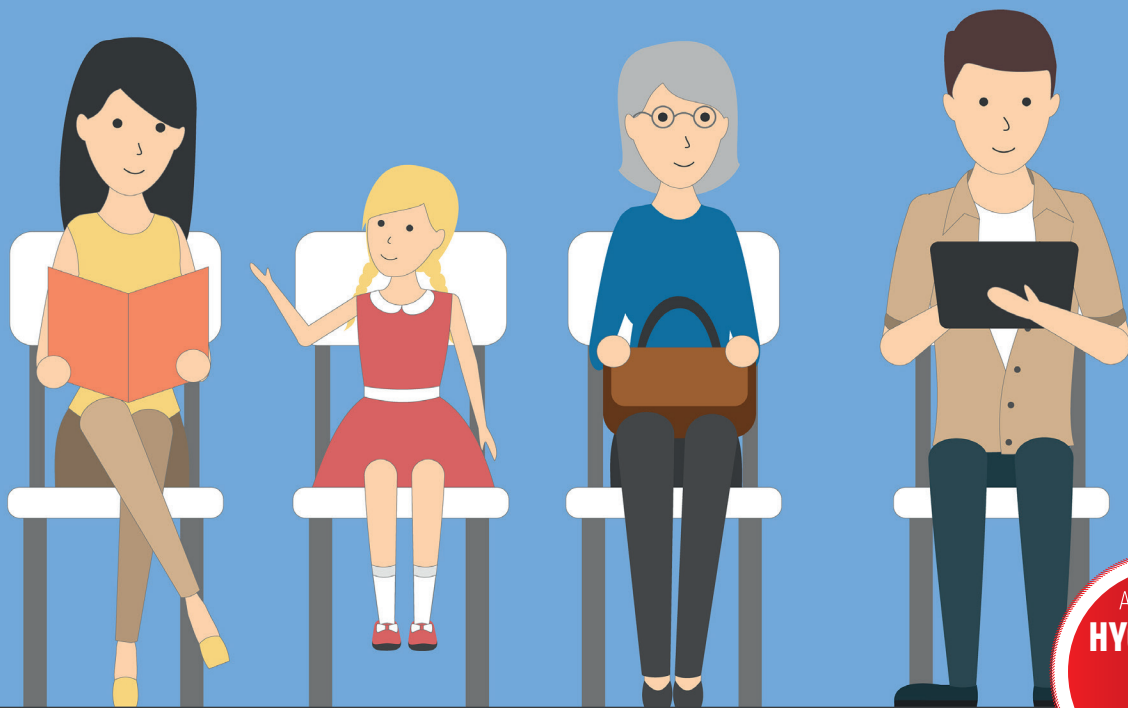


Keep em' coming back for more

Anna Middleton shares her top tips for patient retention



I often reminisce about my first few jobs as a dental hygienist, and how challenging it was to build up my patient diary. When you're new to the industry, it can be an overwhelming task to fill your book with a roster of clients. And what's even more overwhelming is that getting new patients through the door is only just the first step. Keeping them coming back is a whole other ball game.

With most practices compensating hygienists on a percentage basis, it literally pays to be busy, which means the stakes are even higher. Building my diary to be full and consistent didn't happen overnight, but now I'm ticking over comfortably. I'm often asked, 'How do I do it? Why do my patients come back?'

While there's no real formula to patient retention, I can share a few tips that have helped me along the way.

First impressions are everything

Before I've even met the patient, my mindset is focused on winning them over and keeping them coming back. Whether I'm seeing a new patient or stepping into the big shoes of a former beloved hygienist, first impressions are everything. This matters more than ever in our industry because dental hygiene is a high-involvement purchase.

Let me explain.

When patients are paying a premium for a service, such as teeth cleaning, it's extremely important to build a rapport and impress them with your expertise. Think about your hair stylist. Odds are you've probably been going to them for years and trust only them to cut your hair. You don't tend to pop into the nearest hair salon on the fly whenever you need a cut. The same could be said about a hygienist.

Impress your patient on the first go and odds are they'll be booking in with you and only you.

Communication

One of the key ways to impress a new patient is by communicating properly. The biggest communication

problem we have today, is that we don't listen to understand – we listen to reply. If you listen carefully to your patient, they will tell you everything you need to know and from there you can customise your service accordingly.

For me, I use this as an opportunity to look for signs of nervousness and defiance. Nobody likes being lectured so it's no surprise this is one of the top things my patients have told me they don't like. As educators and motivators, we have a duty to deliver important messages of our trade, but it can be challenging to do so in a way that the patient will not only listen but also implement the advice you've given them into their daily hygiene routine.

Knowing your audience is key. I try and deliver the details by communicating in ways that the patient will find relatable, such as by using analogies or a bit of humour.

I'll also involve them in what I'm doing throughout the appointment, for example, by explaining how calculus is formed or what I'm looking for when I probe.

Don't be afraid to communicate with patients on a personal level too. Forget all the dental-related chat – ask them how they are and get to know them! I always try and find out one thing about my patient and pop it in my notes as it helps open conversation next time. Cheesy? No way! It builds rapport and is a nice touch that makes patients feel valued.

Advanced appointments and recall periods

The best way to rebook a patient is to do so on the day of their appointment. If you've blown them away with first impressions, as discussed in point one, this should be easy to do. This works well especially if a patient wants that golden early, late or Saturday appointment. I don't work at the same place all week so my patients know that while I offer plenty of different time slots and days, they need to book early to get their preferred day and time.

In terms of recall periods, I strongly suggest my patients

visit every three to four months. Often, patients come every six months because that's what they've always been told. When

I explain to my patients the importance of more frequent visits, they're more than happy to book in these intervals. I let them know that by having an appointment in the diary, it simply serves as their reminder and they can always change it later if they have a scheduling conflict.

It is important to know that, as always, no patient is the same. I always take into consideration my patients' social and medical history; their dentition and dental history, dexterity, sight, hearing, attitude, lifestyle and current oral health to judge the duration between appointments. Use your judgement and professional knowledge to dictate your own diary and you'll be full before you know it.

Self-promotion

Being a hygienist is essentially about building your own brand. It's extremely important to be out there marketing and selling yourself. Whenever I have down time between patients, I don't hide away in my surgery, I let people know I have a service that's available to them. I use social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to promote my brand and services.

One of my practices sends out regular newsletters and we have A-boards outside, letting the public know we are open and ready for business. If I have gaps on a day and I can't fill them, I'll try and call next week's patients and offer them an earlier slot, which then frees up my diary the following week. Self-promotion is key; if you're not going to promote yourself and your services, then who will? **D**



After qualifying as a dental nurse in 2011, Anna decided to pursue dental hygiene and moved to London to study at The Eastman Dental Hospital. She graduated in 2015 from the Faculty of Royal College of Surgeons of England. You can follow her work on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter @LondonHygienist.