



# Take the mystery out of your service

By Julie Parker

**W**hen gaps start to appear in your appointment book, where does your mind turn to look for answers?

Your marketing strategy? Team adherence to customer service protocols? Slow time of the year? Growing competition in your area?

Maybe the answer to your slowing productivity is more obvious than you think and you just can't see it.

Most dental practices spend some time exploring how to deliver a positive experience for their patients. Then, other aspects of practice management take priority, such as controlling the consumables spending, getting a Practice Manual written up and ensuring room changeovers are quick and efficient. Slowly, the patient experience moves down the list of urgent things to attend to. It will routinely rise back to the top... eventually.

**The experience you create for your patients is the most important element of your practice, period.**

Yes, a high standard of clinical expertise and sound business management principles are important. But, patients will leave your practice if they don't perceive value in their experience with you and without patients, you close your doors.

So how do you know what experience your patients want? What will make them not just become loyal clients, but love your practice so much that they refer their friends and family to you?

The answer is two-fold.

## What are your patients currently experiencing?

Often, the team who work within the practice are too accustomed to their surroundings to objectively gauge the patient's experience when they visit, particularly in the case of first-time patients.

**"A successful system to discover what patients like - and don't like - when visiting your practice is to arrange for a 'mystery shopper' to attend for a consultation... Make sure your team do not know who your mystery shopper is. If you keep their identity a secret even after their visit, you can use the same mystery shopper every year to ensure your practice is remaining on top of their game..."**

There are also challenges to gaining direct feedback from your patients, if you are thinking about surveying them. The response rate to sending surveys is low and patients are often too polite to give you the frank and useful feedback you need.

A successful system to discover what patients like - and don't like - when visiting your practice is to arrange for a "mystery shopper" to attend for a consultation.

Your mystery shopper could be arranged through a dedicated company, but I believe you can gain great results by using a friend or family member. You may even elect to have several mystery shoppers so you receive a range of opinions. A key element to consider when making your selection is to choose a person or people who reflect the kind of patient you want in the practice. These are the ones whose opinions you want directing the design of your future patient experiences.

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Assure your mystery shopper that you will reimburse all costs involved with this project. Then, have them call the practice for the appointment, come in for their consultation, pay for their treatment and wait for any follow up communications your practice provides. You want them to share their thoughts on the entire patient experience.

Provide your mystery shopper with a list of questions you want answered so they can prepare and know what to look for. Don't make it too lengthy, otherwise they will not have the freedom to sit back and experience their dental visit as an average patient would.

Your questionnaire should cover all aspects of a patient's visit, including:

- Initial telephone call (Was it friendly? Efficient? Helpful?);
- Welcome into the practice (Warm? Clean and tidy appearance both inside and out? Easy to locate? Was there parking available?);
- Clinical experience (Caring? Effective and clear communication? Informative? Engaging? Friendly and supportive assistant? Gentle dentist?);
- Exit from practice (Efficient payment process? Happy rapport with receptionist? Was next appointment made?);
- Follow up (Was there any? By appropriate method, be it SMS, email, letter or phone? Did it build further value in overall experience?)

Once you have your mystery shopper's responses, wait. Once you share the project with your team, they will naturally be curious and search recent patients for the identity of the secret visitor and you will lose the chance of this person becoming your regular mystery shopper.

In order for your mystery shopper project to generate useful results, be committed to using the information to change the way your team deliver dental services to your patients. Embrace the feedback, modify current systems and introduce new ones so future patient experiences are more positive.

### What is your future patient experience?

**W**hen practices consider how to provide improved service to their patients, they often limit themselves to what they believe their current premises, team and other perceived limitations restrict them to.

I suggest coming at this from a different angle.

Sit down with your team for a brainstorming session. Allocate someone to be scribe and write down all the valuable ideas that will be generated.

Get everyone in the right mindset by asking them to imagine the best dental practice in the universe. This imaginary practice wins awards every year for magnificent customer service, top-level

patient communication and the extraordinary delivery of dental treatment. Then ask the following questions:

- How would this incredible practice answer the phone?
- How would they welcome a patient into the practice?

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- What would they offer patients in the waiting room?
- How would they manage running late?
- What would they do to ensure patients were comfortable when receiving dental treatment?

- How would they deliver treatment plans?
- How would they quote?
- How would they issue recalls?
- How would they follow up on incomplete treatment?
- How would they manage complaints from patients?
- How would they manage particularly anxious patients?
- How would they show that they value their patients?

Encourage your team to use their imaginations and consider what they would love as a patient of this wonderful practice.

You may not be able to achieve the lofty level of positive experience of this imagined practice, but you can take steps to be as close as possible and create a unique and powerful experience for your patients.

Building a thriving dental practice is made possible when you become patient-centric in your structure and systems.

Jeff Bezos, Founder of Amazon, said it well...

*“We see our customers as invited guests to a party and we are the hosts. It's our job every day to make every important aspect of the customer experience better.”*

If you would like the JPPS Mystery Shopper Questionnaire, simply email [julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au](mailto:julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au) with a request and I will be happy to share it with you.

### About the author

*Julie Parker's whole career has been devoted to the dental industry, starting in 1987 as a dental nurse. In 2003, Julie became the first non-dentist to buy a dental practice in Australia. She owned and managed her practice in Brighton, Victoria for 10 years. During this time, she more than trebled the turnover and her staff base grew from 3 to 12 members. Julie successfully cultivated a winning team and a winning business. Her business programs on how to accomplish a dream dental business are gleaned from her wealth of experience, intensive education and an inquisitive business mind. Julie is a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Time Line Therapy and Hypnotherapy.*

*Julie Parker Practice Success provides dental teams with coaching and training so they can work together and achieve successful outcomes for their dental practice. Contact Julie on 0407-657-729 or [julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au](mailto:julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au) and discover what is on offer to help your team members develop the skills to run an efficient, productive and happy practice.*