



Develop Your Front Desk

by Howard Farran, DDS, MBA, Publisher, *Dentaltown Magazine*

Think about how much training goes into running and practicing in a dental office. Dentists go to school and get trained in the art and science of dentistry for eight, 10 or sometimes even 12 years. That's a long time! Dental hygienists have four years of training in college. My dental assistant Jan went to dental assisting school for a year, like many dental assistants do, to get her degree. But unfortunately the absolute most important position in a dental practice just happens to be the most overlooked when it comes to training – and that's your front desk!

How your front desk interacts with your patients and what this position does for your practice might not seem like a big deal to you, and if that's true I'd take great pride in telling you how utterly wrong you are.

For 25 years I've said if you're the owner of a football team, make sure you have a stellar quarterback; if you own a basketball team, get a seven-foot-tall center; if you have a hockey team, you want the best goalie, and if you own a dental practice, your best employee had better be stationed at your front desk. Your front desk person is always the first staff member to greet your patients as they enter your practice, and they're typically the last person your patients talk to when they leave. The front desk handles all of the money, scheduling and recall. They are the face of your practice, and without them, you have an empty schedule and you can't do any dentistry.

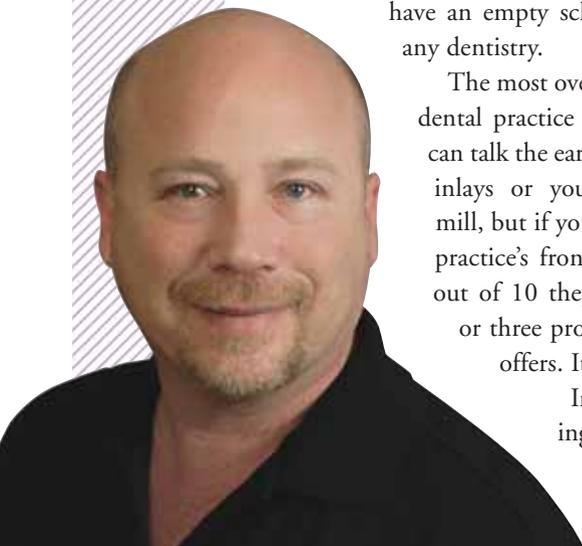
The most overly trained person in any dental practice is the dentist. Doc, you can talk the ear off of anyone about gold inlays or your in-office CAD/CAM mill, but if you start talking to a dental practice's front desk staff, seven times out of 10 they can barely list off two or three procedures that the practice offers. It's so sad.

In 2008, I was re-evaluating my own practice and, while I had an outstanding front-desk team,

I thought there was

room for improvement (there's *always* room for improvement, right?). While I was deciding what to do, I had lunch with one of my best friends here in Phoenix, Arizona – Dr. Thomas Mattern – and he told me how I really should sign my practice up for training with Jay Geier's Scheduling Institute as it made a serious impact on his practice. I might as well have been distracted by a purse full of butterflies, because I wasn't really interested in Tom's endorsement. I thought, *I've trained my staff, I've got an MBA, I know what's going on.* But as the economy tanked and we started seeing fewer new patients come through our doors, I realized a little outside help might tip the scales more in our favor, so I decided to finally listen to Tom, pick up the phone and call the Scheduling Institute.

In the four years we've been working with the Scheduling Institute, we've learned so many valuable lessons. Phone book ads are dead and gone in my Phoenix, Arizona, market; most of the searching Mom does for dental practices is done on Google these days (which means you need to have a killer Web site as well... and I'll get to that in a moment). There are 168 hours in a week and the average dental practice is open only 32 hours a week. Let's say your dental practice gets 100 calls per week and 50 of them go to an answering machine. Hey guys, guess what, those 50 callers are not going to leave a message – they're going to hang up! They always will. And they won't call back. I know for a fact. Why? Because we track all of our incoming calls. They'll just hang up and call the next number on their Google search and schedule the appointment with the first practice that actually *talks* to them. Every single one of those calls your front desk is missing could be a new patient! So instead of thinking of your front desk as "mere overhead," Jay Geier teaches that you ought to beef up your front desk. If you only have one person answering the phones and half of those calls are going to voicemail, you need to hire another person so you can take *all* of those calls in person! If you have another staff member answering the phones, there's now time to pull up charts, answer questions about billing, statements



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and scheduling, and your front desk doesn't have to worry about leaving someone on hold forever (oh, and on that note I should mention my practice *never* puts a new patient on hold, only loyal patients should ever get put on hold)!

Let's say your practice is only open 32 hours a week because you like taking Fridays off. What we learned from Jay Geier is even though your practice isn't doing dentistry on Friday, you still ought to keep your front desk manned for eight hours on that Friday so they can field otherwise missed calls and keep filling your schedule! Now some front-desk staffers might say, "But, Dr. Farran, that's not a good idea because some people might call in that Friday and cancel their appointments

phones might also ring half as much on Friday and Saturday – but they're still ringing, nonetheless! So while the dentist would rather golf on Friday afternoon or Saturday afternoon, that's fine, but he/she really needs to blow open the front office hours. The dentist might only work 32 hours a week, but the practice's phones ought to be answered by live people from 6:30 a.m. until 6:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday; 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Friday; and maybe 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. on Saturday – but only if the data you're tracking tells you that these are high-call-volume hours. If you double the hours you answer the phone, you will just about double the orders you fill, it is just that simple!

Think about it this way: Heartland Dental, the largest dental office chain in the world, figured out it was a total cash cow to start a call center in Effingham, Illinois, where they set up a gazillion phones and brought in a huge staff to answer after-hours calls. Why did Heartland do this? Because it is the front desk's job to sell appointments, and the more people you have answering the phone during the day and during off hours, the more appointments you're going to sell. Whenever I lecture and I ask, "Where are

the front desk receptionists in this crowd?" and a few hands go up, and I walk up to them and ask them what their job is, they usually answer, "Well, I answer the phone and take care of billing and I file insurance..."

No!

That's not the job of the front desk! Your front desk exists to sell appointments! In the back office, it's the dentist's, hygienist's and assistant's job to sell dentistry and treatment plans. Your front desk exists to *sell appointments* and make sure the eight to 12 years you spent in dental school wasn't a total waste of time and money.

Price is always the number-one variable in economics, and the number-one question new patients ask is, "How much do you charge for a crown?" Most front desks will tell that potential patient the price, and usually when they hear the answer they say, "Thanks," and then hang up. You can't do this! When they ask how much a crown costs, your front desk should be trained enough to say, "Well, there are many different types of crowns at various price points, why don't we schedule a time for you to come in and meet our doctor?" When the new patient asks, "Do you take my insurance?" the best response is,

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for next Monday or Tuesday." I say, great! A cancelled appointment is 100 times better than a no-show! At least everyone on the team would know when they walked in Monday morning that the 8 a.m. appointment cancelled – or better yet, with someone staffed at the front desk that Friday, after they take the cancelled patient off the schedule and a new patient calls 10 minutes later, the front desk now has the opportunity to say, "Mrs. Bussy cancelled her 8 a.m. appointment on Monday, but I was able to re-fill it with Mr. Nanking." You were put on this earth to do dentistry – not try to figure out how to fill the gaps in your schedule. That's your front desk's responsibility.

Something else we learned that every practice should take into consideration: There is software you can install on your phone system (as long as you have a modern voiceover Internet protocol phone system, which, if you don't have by now, you need to seriously consider it), that can give you the tracking data of everyone who has called your practice. So many dental practices are open from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and if you tracked their calls you might notice the calls start rolling in at 6:30 a.m. and don't stop coming until 6 or 7 p.m. The

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“When you come in, while the doctor is examining you, we’ll take a look at your insurance.” Quit being so obsessed about telling your patients exactly what you charge for a crown. Get them on your schedule!

Our latest training day with the Scheduling Institute was a couple months ago. A member of Jay Geier’s team came in with a collection of recorded calls she made to my practice to test my front desk. Even after four years there were still some things my team needed to improve upon. Much like when a doctor is telling his or her patients that they need an MOD or a PFM, patients don’t understand what it means when you ask if it is a PPO, HMO, or indemnity! They don’t teach insurance lingo in American high schools! The goal is to get patients into the office, so that means everything needs to be laid out in plain language they can understand.

Let’s say the person on the other end of the line is hemming and hawing over whether he should come to your practice and he’s about to hang up. Your staff should be trained enough to collect his contact data so you can call him back later in the day when he’s not

so hyped up. Maybe he’s tired of the search and really wants to take care of the hot tooth that’s been bothering him for the last week. When your team calls back to find out what the potential patient decided to do, that shows genuine concern and he might actually come to your practice. It shows even greater concern when you can fit him into your schedule at the next possible time he can come in.

And a lot of times, when the new patient actually comes in, meets the staff, shakes the doctor’s hand, realizes how close the practice is to his house or his office, but he finds out that the practice doesn’t take his insurance, a good chunk of those people actually *stay*. Yeah, I’m not kidding! If he likes you, your team and your office, he’s going to stay and might not even give it a second thought to pay for his treatment out of pocket. Remember, half of all Americans don’t have dental insurance anyway.

At the same time we started working with the Scheduling Institute, we turned our Web site over to Sesame Communications. Sesame built our practice an awesome Web site (check it out: www.todaysdental.com) and did wonders for our search engine optimization (SEO) on search engines like Google. I happen to be in the fifth largest city in America, and Sesame has gotten our practice to show up first, second or third in all local Google searches. It’s changed how people find us. Sesame also beefed up our Facebook page (check that out, too: www.facebook.com/TodaysDental). I invite you to “Like” our page so you can see all of our updates and special offers. In fact, while you’re on Facebook, stop by my page (www.facebook.com/DrHowardFarran) and “Like” that as well so you can glean some more wisdom from my 25 years of personal practice mistakes (and if you’re on Twitter, catch me at “@HowardFarran”)! It’s tools like a killer Web site, a strong social media presence and a highly trained front desk staff filling your schedule that can and will revolutionize the way you practice.

Always make sure you keep up on the new and greatest dentistry equipment, materials and techniques, but remember to reinvest in your front desk as well. When you do and you notice the benefits, you won’t ever think twice about it. ■

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Howard Farran, DDS, MBA, is an international speaker who has written dozens of published articles. To schedule Howard to speak to your next national, state or local dental meeting, e-mail colleen@farranmedia.com.

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