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Top Ten Tips On How To Do Office Surveys

Patient feedback is vital to running your practice. If you don't ask you don't get.....a Coach Ron-ism. When you ask your patients for what they want or how you're doing, you will be amazed what you will learn. Use simple surveys that give your patients the opportunity to provide you and your team feedback. Consider doing office surveys at least twice a year. What you can expect to receive is information that will help you grow your practice.....as well as your income. Nationwide, satisfaction surveys have long been popular among health plans and employers. Increasingly, experts say, physicians and dentists are also conducting surveys, and for good reason. (1)

But experts point out that measuring patient satisfaction isn't as easy as slapping a few questions on a card. The process needs to be carefully mapped out, from the way you ask questions to the way you respond to results. (1)

Consider the following guidelines:

1. **Determine the objective of your survey**...what do you want to learn, what do you want to improve, grow, change, and expand? What decisions do you want to make with this valuable information?
2. **Ask the right questions.** Choose questions carefully, or your survey won't give you the information you really need. Be very specific about what you want to learn about your practice. Do you want to know how well your patients are being greeted? Do you want to know how your patients feel about how well their teeth were cleaned? Do you want to know if your injections are painless?
3. **Keep your surveys short and sweet and easy to read and understand.** People are busy (or so they think they are) and when surveying patients we need to be sensitive to their time constraints. Think like the customer and make them simple and brief.

4. **Ask 5-8 questions** that require a simple “yes” or “no” answer or question that ask the patient to rank your performance from 1-10. Example:
“Payment options were discussed along with clear financial arrangements.
 Yes No
5. **Ask 2-3 open-ended questions** to find answers to specific areas of your practice. Open-ended questions give the patient the opportunity to share how they “feel” and obliges them to respond in a way other than “yes” or “no.” This will be a great way to discover what they like **MOST** about your office.
6. **Invite your patients** to fill out the survey while in the reception room or in the dental chair while waiting for anesthetic to take effect. Ask them to fill them out anonymously and place in a specially constructed survey collection container in your reception room. For those who cannot complete while in the office provide them with the survey along with a self-addressed, postage-paid envelop requesting they fill out and mail as soon as they get home.
7. **Distribute for the greatest results.** Anticipate 75 to 150 surveys to be completed over a 3-4 week survey period. This number will provide enough information to measure patient perceptions. Some practices will ask every patient of majority age to fill out your survey for the next 3-4 weeks. The danger is that some patients will slip by without receiving a survey, or your appointment coordinator might not give a form to patients who look particularly upset. One good way to get a random sample is to give a survey to every third patient who comes in during the week.
8. **Collate the results** after accumulating all the surveys over the designated survey time. Assign one staff person to this task along with reporting the results to the entire team. What is key here is to have this person suggest the implications of the final results. As a follow up to this tabulation of information, expect to share this data with your patients through your office newsletter or your bulletin board in the reception room. Most of us who fill out surveys never know the results...here is an opportunity to market to your patients that you are “really” interested in improving the practice and that their comments are valuable.

9. **Let your patients know what action steps you are taking as a result of the information you learned from the survey.** This will encourage your patients to be willing to help you knowing that their comments make a difference. Use the results. No matter how much you spend or how carefully you word the survey, it will do little good if you let the results gather dust in a drawer. Set aside team meeting time to develop a process in which all team members participate in a session where they hear the results and develop solutions to areas identified by the patients.

10. **Pay close attention to less-than-positive comments.** If you think that if you receive only one negative comment out of 100 you're doing great.....think again. What that really means is that there are many more of your patients that are simply hesitant to complain or say anything bad about you. If all your replies are 10 out of 10, get nervous because something ain't right.

If doing in-office surveys seems like a daunting task, consider using outside firms to conduct your surveys. Companies like QuestionPro.com which offers real-time professional surveys or SmartTalk (www.smarttalk.com) which has an application called SmartSurvey, enable you to query your patients quickly, easily, and cost-effectively. It is an affordable method for surveying large groups and enhancing statistical validity.

What is important is that the practice put its money where its mouth is. The practice must pay close attention to its survey results. "Every single practice in this country, no matter how big, has competitors who want their patients," said Kevin W. Sullivan, president of Sullivan/Luallin Inc., a San Diego-based patient satisfaction consulting firm that works with physicians. "If you don't know what your strengths and weaknesses are, you can't compete." We need to do the same in our dental offices.

Jerry Seibert, a health care researcher says, "If there is a good relationship between the patients and the doctors, patients will put up with a lot of other problems." (1) The same holds true in all dental practices. Patients will tolerate those little imperfections if they feel "connected" with the doctor and team.

If quality of care is part of your practice vision then measuring quality is vital. It's vital not only because it is your mission, but also because it translates into financial health for your practice. Successful dental practices must realize that providing quality dental care requires data. It is not enough just to say you measure

quality, you must be able to prove it to the patients and to every member of your team. If you believe that quality helps us define who you are....if you state in your Vision that your team will provide the best patient care available; than it stands to reason that your service goals must meet the highest standards. Take the next step and develop your next office survey and learn how you can improve an already wonderful practice.

References:

1. **Patient satisfaction surveys: how to do them right**, from the April 2000 *ACP-ASIM Observer*, copyright © 2000 by the American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine. By [Bryan Walpert](#): <http://www.acponline.org/journals/news/apr00/surveys.htm>

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