



Implant Game Changers

A White Paper Series By Roger P. Levin, DDS

Implant Game Changers is a monthly whitepaper on an important implant practice management topic. It provides you with a quick and easy way to understand a specific business challenge and how to translate the solution into higher production and profit, greater efficiency, more implant patients, lower stress and greater personal satisfaction. These whitepapers will contain recommended actions and strategies for a stronger and faster COVID-19 recovery and sustained practice success.

How Customer Service Can Differentiate Your Practice

Customer service is one of the most talked about and least implemented business concepts. Beginning in the 1980s, the customer service revolution was glorified in the book *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman. This book clearly outlined how companies like Nordstrom built their business and differentiated themselves through five-star customer service.

Since that time, customer service has been viewed almost as a “moral standard” of businesses and dental practices. A dental practice would never say that it is proud to have mediocre or poor customer service. However, many do say that they are proud to have five-star customer service. But, do they really?

Customer service is one of those business disciplines that emerged without clear definition. How exactly do you define five-star customer service? Is there a generally accepted survey that everyone would agree reflects the answer? The answer of course, is no. Therefore, we find that the majority of practices that think their customer service is five-star are actually more likely three or four-star.

In a study of specialty practices by Levin Group, doctors and staff members were asked to rate the level of customer service that they believe they provided on a scale of 0 to 10. Their average rating was 8.9. We then asked patients about their perception of the customer service they received, and the average rating from patients was 7.2. This isn't bad, but it's not the 8.9 rating that practices think that they have, and it's definitely not five-star customer service.

Specialty practices typically rate their customer service higher than their patients do. It is not that practices have poor customer service as much as that they do not provide true five-star customer service.

Who Are Your Customers?

In specialty practices, we have asked hundreds of staff members the question, “Who are your customers?” The typical answer is “the patients”. The truth is that specialty practices have two sets of customers: patients and referring

doctors. This often leads to an interesting discussion about which group is more important than another. While both groups should receive five-star customer service, from Levin Group's perspective, the answer is clear – referring doctors. We determined this by posing a single question:

If you had to lose a good referring doctor or one single large patient case which would you choose?

This is a business judgment, not a “human value” judgment. Financially speaking, referring doctors are far more important financially than any single patient. Once a practice understands that referring doctors are a key customer group, then they will also understand why they need different customer service systems for referring doctors and patients.

Customer Service For Referring Doctors

The starting point of designing a customer service system is to understand what the customer actually wants. Clayton Christenson, the brilliant Harvard Business School professor and author of the bestselling business book, *The Innovators Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms To Fail*, often made the statement that most businesses don't know what business they are in. What he meant was that businesses were selling a product, but the customers were not necessarily buying the product, they were buying the solution. As it has been said, “Nobody buys a vacuum cleaner because they love vacuum cleaners. They are buying a clean floor.” The same concept can be applied to referring doctors. Although they may like you, that's not the only reason they refer. It's not even the most important reason. Their reasons for referring include:

1. They don't feel qualified to provide the specialty treatment.
2. They want the very best care for their patients.
3. They have a strong relationship with the specialist.
4. The patient requested to be sent to a specialist.
5. The referring doctor is not comfortable designing the treatment plan.

6. They refer to the specialty practice that taught them how to restore implants following surgical placement.

These are not in any order, but if we were to rank these reasons, we believe the #1 factor is the relationship with the specialist. For 36 years, we have gathered extensive data on referrals to the specialty practice. We have continually found that as relationships strengthen, referrals increase. Given this finding, we strongly believe that referring doctors don't refer to the best specialist – they refer to the best relationship.

Let's bring the focus back to implants. Implants, unlike other disciplines and referrals in dentistry, require interdisciplinary care. Typically, the specialist will place the implant and the restorative doctor will restore the case. Unlike a crown that is referred back from an endodontist following a root canal, dental implants have a wider variety of case design and treatment. This means that the level of support, communication, and customer service must be higher than in other types of cases. And yet, the reality of interdisciplinary care is that communication is often lacking. We continually hear about specialists who make it difficult for the restorative doctor to easily restore the case. While improvement in implant systems have helped to decrease some of these obstacles, they still exist. These obstacles can reflect clinical treatment, but communication and support from the specialty practice to the restorative practice is a customer service factor.

Improving Customer Service for Your Referring Doctors

There are several areas where customer service can be improved for referring doctors and practices. These include:

1. Educate your team that referring doctors are very important customers. Be sure to advise your team that this does not negate the importance of excellent customer service for patients, but referring practices are the lifeblood of referrals to the specialty practice. Also, keep in mind that while all referring doctors and teams are important, they are not equally important. We have always encouraged specialty practices to put their referring practices into A, B, C and D categories that represent their level of referrals. Top referring practices should receive the highest levels of service just as the best airline passengers receive the best status and benefits.

Help your team understand what the expectations are for each category of referring doctors. For example, A-level referring doctors are allowed to send their patients over immediately upon contacting the office. The specialty practice can also offer to reach out to the referred patient directly to arrange a convenient appointment. This should not be the same approach that is taken for C or D-level doctors (who refer at lower levels) until a referral marketing program is able to move them up into an A or B category. Training the specialty team on providing customer service for different levels of referring practices will ensure that the best referral sources receive the best customer service.

2. Help referring doctors see the value of a positive relationship with you. Keep in mind that once relationships are built they must be maintained. This can be done through a variety of different referral marketing strategies, outreach, and live events (after we move through the COVID-19 era). For example, a simple technique we recommend is checking in by text with a different group of three referring doctors each day. Let them know you appreciate their referral or send them an interesting piece of information. You'll be surprised at how this simple task will make a difference. Doing this five minutes a day, four times a week, and 48 weeks a year will reach each referring doctor numerous times with positive outcomes. Remember, this is an exercise that should be maintained on a regular basis. Inconsistency is one of the main reasons for decreases in referrals.

3. Periodically ask referring doctors if they're completely satisfied with your customer service. Even the best customer service organizations often find that they need to make modifications or improvements. This is especially true for specialty practices, as customer service is not their main product or service. However, customer service is the foundation that will allow specialty practices to increase referrals, case acceptance, and practice production.

Dental implants require both the specialty and restorative practice to work together to maintain excellent communication and continually improve the process. By regularly asking referring doctors (and their team) if they're completely satisfied, you will gain excellent feedback that can help you come up with new strategies and ideas. Great leaders are always interested in how they can be better leaders. Top implant producing practices have doctors who go out of their

way to find opportunities to improve their relationship and communication with their referring doctors. They are very comfortable hearing about anything (even the criticism) that might help them improve their practices.

Can Five-Star Customer Service Be Maintained?

Even companies with the best customer service can sometimes drop the ball. For example, we recently had the opportunity to work with a practice that had changed three front desk people in six-months. The original three staff members were well-liked as evidenced by one top referral source who said to the specialist, “When we need something we don’t call you; we call Mary.” Unfortunately, the new replacements were not as sophisticated in customer service or communication and were alienating referring practices. They viewed their jobs only as focusing on answering the phone, getting patients scheduled, and completing their daily tasks. They were not unpleasant people, but they didn’t go out of their way to focus on customer service. When the specialist became aware that referrals were starting to slow, he contacted some of his better referring doctors for feedback. Luckily, the referring doctors shared honest feedback and the

specialist was able to correct the problem and train his new team to deliver a five-star star customer service experience to every referring practice and referred patient.

Five-star customer service can certainly be sustained, but you must “exercise it constantly” or you’ll fall out of shape. Anytime there is a staff change, the new team members should be indoctrinated into the five-star customer service culture. In addition, the entire team should look for opportunities to discuss, identify, and improve customer service. This is what top practices do and it works every time.

Summary

Five-star customer service isn’t simply about being nice, nor is it a concept that can be discussed once or twice and everyone understands what to do. It’s a system that can be applied in almost any specialty practice, and when properly implemented, will become the foundation for increasing referrals, referral sources, and production. With it, you have every opportunity to expand in all those areas. Without it, your opportunities are limited.

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