

CREATING PATIENT ADVOCATES WHO RETURN AND REFER

by Tina Soika | President of American
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A thriving practice does a great job at bringing new patients in the front door. And, they also do a great job of creating relationships that encourage patients to return for care and refer friends and family. Creating these valuable long-term patient relationships is very similar to creating long-term friendships in life. Here are a few proven ways to build lasting relationships:

DELIVER A GREAT EXPERIENCE

In life, if you have a positive interaction or experience with a person or colleague you tend to want to continue the relationship. And, the converse is true. If the experience is negative or did not meet your expectations, you may not see the value in pursuing a friendship. In your practice, patients often determine the quality of the practice based on the experience they have there because they expect clinical excellence. Toby Cosgrove, from the Cleveland Clinic said, “Now patients judge us the same way they would a restaurant or a hotel — on the experience they have while they are with us.” The patient’s experience starts from first contact, which is often by phone, and continues with the “physical experience” of your practice environment, the examination and the interaction with the team.

STAY IN CONTACT

Creating a long-term relationship, personally and professionally, takes effort. Close friends are built over time as are great patient relationships. That’s why we need to consistently communicate with our patients so they know we care about their hearing health and connectivity with family and friends and

are ready to help when they need us. Effective patient communications should be:

PERSONAL — Talk to them as people first, then patients.

RELEVANT — When our services and products are relevant to patients, there is no need to sell. They will want to buy.

EDUCATIONAL — Patients are interested in their hearing health and would appreciate information on services, products and the latest technology.

To be personal, relevant and educational, your communications must be segmented by type of patient. Think of your marketing strategy as a “funnel” of people’s contact information and email addresses. The first thing you must do is segment the people into groups so you can talk specifically and personally to them and provide products and services that meet their needs. One way to do this is to divide your list into three types of patients: tested-not-treated, tested-not-candidate and hearing device purchaser. Each of these “types” of patients require different messaging. For example, for

those tested-not-treated, you may want to share with them testimonials about how others' lives have been changed because of hearing devices. Peer testimonials are very powerful. You may also want to provide solutions to barriers to care, such as cost, reliability and accessibility. For example, to address cost concerns, you can tell patients about special financing with the CareCredit healthcare credit card.

LISTEN TO YOUR PATIENTS

Everybody wants to be listened to and have their opinions valued. Your patients like to hear, but they also like to be listened to. Customer surveys can be a powerful relationship tool on many levels. Surveys can, of course, provide you with the information you need to understand where you are exceeding expectations (so you can celebrate) and where there is opportunity to improve. They can communicate to patients that you care about their opinions and experience enough to ask them and, when appropriate, implement any improvement ideas they may have suggested. Surveys also can set the stage for patient referrals. One of the most important questions you can ask patients is, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to recommend us to a friend or family member?" This number is called the Net Promoter Score and it has a high correlation of the person's likelihood to buy again or become an advocate.

ASK FOR ADVOCACY

Finally, ask your patients to become your long-term advocates. Many patients are happy to post online

reviews and refer friends or family, but they just don't think about it. It's our job to make sure they know we'd appreciate the advocacy. One opportunity to ask is when you receive great feedback or a high Net Promoter Score. Thank the patient and ask for a referral.

“MRS. JONES, WE ARE SO HAPPY YOU ARE HAPPY WITH OUR PRACTICE AND TEAM. WOULD YOU MIND SHARING YOUR POSITIVE EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS ON YELP OR HEALTHGRADES? WE WOULD SO APPRECIATE IT!”

Also, before patients leave the practice, every one of them should be asked, "In our practice, we believe everyone over the age of 50 should get their hearing screened. Can you recommend two or three people who would benefit from a free hearing screening?" If they can recommend a few friends, you may want to either try to capture the contact information or provide the patient with business-size cards they can distribute.

Investing the time, energy and resources in creating long-term patient relationships means you care about patients enough to deliver the type of experience they deserve, to communicate and deliver relevant information, to listen to their feedback and to ask them to commit to a long-term relationship with you by becoming your advocate. ❖



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Joining AHAA as its Chief Operating Officer in June 2000, Tina was responsible for all accounting, operations, administration and technology initiatives. In 2003, Tina was named President. Prior to joining AHAA, she served as Senior Vice President of Operations for NovaCare, Inc. Tina holds a Master's Degree and Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech/Language Pathology.

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