



ORTHO2

# Empowering Patient Communication

by **Charlene White**

**T**hink of two recent incidents you have had as a customer—in a grocery store, restaurant, gas station, etc. Try to remember one positive experience and one negative. In both cases, analyze the conversation that took place. During the positive experience, how did the employee's communication make you feel? During the negative experience, how did the communication make you feel?

It is interesting how the very positive and the highly negative interactions stick in our minds, while the average experiences are forgotten. This same philosophy is true in the orthodontic office. Your team can learn how to turn patients on or off with their communication skills.

Empowering communication skills create very positive impressions and lead to future referrals for your practice.

In this article, I will outline several specific conversations designed to make the patient feel important. It is rare for a patient to leave an office with this kind of uplifted feeling, but when they do, it reaps big rewards for your practice. It is not what you say, but how you say it that makes a difference.

I recommend reviewing these conversations as a team and making a commitment to implement them in your office.

## Patient and Parent Greetings

I have had an opportunity to observe how patients and parents are greeted in many offices around the country.

Most of the time the new patient walks in and the appointment coordinator says, "Hello, you must be Susie. Have a seat and we will be with you in a few minutes." This is a friendly greeting, but it has room for improvement:

*"Hello, you must be Susie. (extend hand) My name is Toni, and I am Dr. Joseph's appointment coordinator. It is so nice to meet you. Rosie, our new patient coordinator, will be with you in just a moment. In the meantime, you and mom feel free to help yourselves to some coffee or juice." (point out coffee area)*

The introduction is the important part of the greeting that is often overlooked in many offices. Each staff member should introduce themselves as they meet new patients and parents.

## Asking for Referrals

How often do you ask for referrals? If this is not being done in your office, you are missing out on a great opportunity to attract new patients. "Ask and you shall receive."

You may be thinking, "Is that professional?" It is truly professional, and people appreciate your enthusiasm.

*"Brad, you are such a great patient. We would like to have more patients just like you. If any of your friends are thinking of seeing an orthodontist, ask them to give us a call for an appointment."*

If a patient or parent compliments the office:

*"Thank you, Mrs. Graham. We appreciate that comment. If you know of anyone who is thinking of seeing an orthodontist, tell them we would be happy to see them."*

If a patient has orthodontic insurance:

*"I do not know if you are aware of it, Mrs. Brown, but your company offers excellent orthodontic benefits. If you have any co-workers who have been thinking about using this benefit, please have them call me. I would be happy to make them an appointment."*

Asking for referrals is a habit that must be developed in the office. I recommend setting a goal to target at last three people a day and make a commitment to ask for referrals. Work on this as a team and watch your practice grow!

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## Patient Education—Inform not Scorn

### Oral Hygiene Instruction

I always advise doctors and staff that their responsibility is to inform, not scorn. Years ago, orthodontists and staff used authoritative management in motivating patients to cooperate. That no longer works in today's society. It alienates patients and costs the practice future referrals.

I recommend training all clinical staff in exactly what to say when dealing with a patient who has poor oral hygiene. The instructions should be given in a manner that is never embarrassing. Consider the following:

*"James, remember the day we put your braces on and we discussed how it was going to be more of a challenge to brush your teeth with appliances? Well, in examining your teeth today I see that you are brushing well in this area. (point out one area) I would like for you to look in your mouth and tell me if you see any areas that may need more attention. (let the patient show you) That's right. I feel confident you can improve in those areas before your next appointment. Learning to brush with braces is a challenge for everyone, James, and our job is to do what we can to help you meet that goal as quickly as possible."*

This is an example of empowering communication:

- A. Document the chart. "Discussed oral hygiene with patient and had him point out missed areas. Send card 03/30/09. Please discuss progress next time."
- B. Send a postcard to the referring dentist if it has been an ongoing problem.
- C. Handwrite an encouragement card to the patient.
- D. If the patient's hygiene does not improve, the parent must be notified. Have the assistant walk the patient out to talk with the parent. "Mrs. Forest, Dr. Sarver wanted me to let you know that we have been working with James in his brushing techniques. Brushing with braces is more difficult. We would like for you to help him with this by encouraging him at home."
- E. Recommend a Sonicare toothbrush.
- F. Reward the patient for improvement.

### Elastic and Appliance Wear

If a patient is going to be wearing elastics and headgear, make the patient aware of the goal. Let them know how many millimeters of change you are hoping to achieve. Draw a visual picture on the patient's score card. Indicate the progress at each appointment. The patient must be fully aware of their role in success of the treatment:

*"Wanda, Dr. Hudson has asked me to show you how to place these elastics in your mouth today. The purpose of these elastics is to move these teeth (show the patient) from here to here. In orthodontics, we measure that in millimeters of movement, which will create spaces here and here. (point out to the patient) I know you want to get your braces off as quickly as possible. The more we work together, the faster we will reach our goal. At your next appointment, we will mark your progress right here. (show the patient the chart) I feel confident you will have made great progress."*

It is important for the assistant to make a note on the record to discuss this with Wanda at the next appointment. If the assistant ignores the progress on the next visit, Wanda will lose motivation. Consistency is key.

### The Deband Appointment

Consider scheduling a deband conference where the doctor and a staff member have an opportunity to show the patient and parent the progress that was made. Dr. Wick Alexander demonstrates the deband appointment very well in his lectures. At the end of the visit he gives the patient a super smile certificate which can be ordered through Orec. Dr. Alexander signs the certificate personally and has it framed, ready to hang on the wall. Even adult patients are exited about the certificate. Many hang them on the wall in their office or home. After he presents the certificate, Dr. Alexander says to the patient:

*"Johnny, there is someone else here who we need to thank, and that is your mom and dad. They made a sacrifice for you and you will realize that when you go back to school and see the kids who have not been able to have braces for whatever reason. Your parents could have taken this money and gone on a vacation, but they sacrificed so you could have this beautiful set of teeth. You really need to thank your parents. The best way that you can thank them and me is to get out into this world and make a positive difference. You can be part of the problem or part of the solution. I hope you will make a difference by being part of the solution."*

Is that ever empowering! How would you like to be the parent standing there listening to the orthodontist giving your child that type of encouragement. The key to building a successful practice is building relationships.

I always recommend giving the patient an opportunity to write a note to the parent at the deband appointment as a thank you for their braces. The note is then mailed from the office.

### Talking with Parents after the Visit

Remember that parents are bringing you their most prized possession, **their children**. As Dale Carnegie writes, visualize a sign on the chest of every patient that says, "Make me feel important!" The most powerful thing a doctor or assistant can

say to a parent after they visit is something positive about their child:

*"I assisted Dr. Sawrie with Beth's treatment today, Mrs. West. Dr. Sawrie is pleased with her progress. Beth is obviously a very responsible young lady. She has proved this by following Dr. Sawrie's instructions well."*

### Late Patients and No Shows

Dr. Michael LeBleuf states in his book, *How to Win Customers and Keep Them for Life*, that the greatest business secret in the world is rewarding behavior you want repeated.

When a patient walks in late for the first time say this:

*"Randy, we are glad you are here. We were a little concerned since you are one of our patients who is always on schedule."*

This philosophy also applies when calling no show patients:

*"Mrs. Thomas, this is Pat calling from Dr. Klar's office. Jamie missed his appointment yesterday and we were a little concerned since you are one of our patients who does not miss their appointments."*

### Financial Accounts

Most payment trends are established within the first three months of setting up an account. Cross check all accounts that have been established for three months. If the account has been paid on time each month, send a letter or card:

*"We just wanted you to know how much we appreciate the fact that your account has been paid in such a timely manner since your contract was initiated. Having patients like you brightens our day. Thank you for choosing our office!"*

### The Patient Exit

When the appointment coordinator makes the next appointment, it is important to bid the patient farewell. Often the card is handed to the patient and the appointment coordinator looks at the next person in line as to say, "Next." Bid each patient farewell instead:

*"Thank you for coming in today Sally. We are looking forward to seeing you again in six weeks."*

Bidding the patients farewell makes them feel important and makes them think twice about missing the next appointment.

### Conclusion

Empowering communication motivates people to take positive action. This creates a win/win situation for the orthodontic team. Patient cooperation enhances appointment book control, overhead control, doctor and staff morale, and collections. Utilize this article in a future staff meeting. You also want to make sure the tone of that meeting is positive. ♡

# About the Author



Charlene White has a unique talent to inform, motivate, and entertain. Since 1980, Charlene's reputation as a management expert and speaker has soared, aided by overwhelmingly positive results reported by her audiences. Prior to founding her consulting firm, Charlene worked for five years as a registered dental hygienist and office administrator. For hundreds of orthodontic professionals each year, Charlene's energy, stage presence, and depth of knowledge have motivated them to greater effectiveness in their practices and individual careers. Her flexible, realistic approach takes a "facilitator's" path to success, emphasizing how to adapt her methods to one's own personal style. If you have any questions or would like to schedule an in-office consultation, contact Charlene White by calling Progressive Concepts at (800) 445-7805.