Director of First Impressions

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"The way to a customer's heart and wallet lies in how well we initially serve our customers and in our ability to recover from occasional lapses in service" Unknown

The ultimate irony in our medical offices is that the first person (at least in most cases) that people see when they walk in your door is also the same person that will be collecting their money when they leave.

Is your front desk a profit center in your practice or a center of lost profit? Is your front desk person a person that is helping your practice or hurting it?

If you haven't noticed, podiatric practices around the country are beginning to integrate some form of "in office dispensing" into their offices and as this trend grows (as it should) your front desk staff's role becomes even more critical to the success of your bottom line.

If your patients don't feel welcomed into your practice when they walk in the door, why on earth would you expect them to feel good about buying that tube of cream sitting on your shelf?

Training your staff in basic customer service standards is vital for the success of any practice, but the first step in making your front desk staff more effective is understanding just how vital they are to your business. In many practices it seems, the front desk operations seem to be the area of least concern; the place where we put the least trained and least resourced of all the staff members. The result of this attitude? Poor collections, irritable, frustrated patients and overall disorganization.

Studies have shown that by incorporating basic customer service standards along with sound strategies to increase collections (yes, that means a written strategy), besides seeing an immediate increase in patient satisfaction, you can expect a 5 percent to 10 percent improvement in overall practice collections.

"Treat every customer as if they sign your paycheck…because they do".
Unknown

How can you do it? See how it works first hand. Many of us during the busy time of the day probably don't have a clue what all happens at the front desk while we are seeing patients. Taking a part of your day to evaluate the flow and the potential bottlenecks that can occur in your front office can be eye opening.

Also helpful is having your front staff personnel sit with the billing staff to review denied claims, for example, pointing out instances where they could have provided some additional information or other assistance.

Here are some common front desk problems that will make your office a center of lost profit.

- lack of, or inconsistencies in, collecting copays and coinsurance amounts,
- inefficient protocols for handling phone calls while registering patients
- failure to collect patients' previous balances,
- inability to accept credit/debit cards,
- not obtaining current patient information,
- inefficiencies in chart preparation delaying patient's being called back
- moody attitudes
- not verifying insurance information electronically or in person,
- not obtaining insurance referrals (when required).

- not knowing the prices for products sold in your office
- not having a price schedule for private pay patients

Not only will these issues create losses in revenue, they will also give your patients the impression that your front desk staff is clueless, confused and disorganized— the opposite of what you'd like them to believe.

"Director of First Impressions"

The impression your front desk presents to patients is a reflection of your entire practice, and can determine the tone for the rest of the visit. Why not give a front-desk employee the title of "Director of First Impressions" to signify the importance of this function? You might find this simple change enhances his or her commitment to doing the job well while underscoring his or her value to the practice.

A kind word can warm three months of winter. Japanese Proverb

One office manager of a large practice in Texas asks her staff to remember a "snappy" catch phrase when greeting patients. The acronym "SNAP" stands for;
1) S: <u>Smile</u>, 2) N: say the <u>Name</u> of the patient, 3) A: Ask, "<u>May I help you?"</u> and 4) P: <u>Make a Parting comment</u> like "Have a great day" or "Look forward to seeing you next time".

Although very simple, a tool like this can make your staff make you look good. In the hectic pace of a front office, little things like remembering to smile, asking a patient about their kids or simply just addressing the patient by their name can go a long way.

By establishing rapport with the patient, your staff can more easily collect the necessary pieces for proper claim filing and profitability.

Organizations have more to fear from lack of quality internal customer service than from any level of external customer service.
Ron Tillotson

Boosting collections

With today's insurance shifting to higher copay amounts, collecting copays at the time of service is perhaps the front-desk staff's most important task. Failure to do so can significantly cut into the practice's profitability.

Using practice management software to track collections and payments is not only important to prevent lost revenue, but it also allows the staff to share data to set goals for improvement. Certain practice management systems effectively track, by provider and location, the expected copay, versus what was actually collected. Once the baseline is established, encourage and make your staff aware that you are monitoring improvements and noting their success.

Better collections will increase revenue, reduce the number of patient statements, and the number of phone calls into your front office.

"One customer, well taken care of, could be more valuable than $10,000 worth of advertising."
Jim Rohn

Rewarding Your Staff?

"Well done is better than well said." *Benjamin Franklin*

I think it would be fair to say that most practices can easily find room for improvement when it comes to increasing collections, but finding ways to motivate staff can be difficult.

Although a simple “thank you” can go a long way toward motivating staff to continue to work hard, rewarding your staff for their successes with movie tickets, a free pizza lunch, or paid time can instill pride and increase productivity.

Be creative in rewarding your staff. Besides simply making your staff aware that you are not oblivious to the importance of their job, give them a reason to smile.

Collecting previously owed balances is an area of increased revenue that is often overlooked. If your staff is not looking this information up when EACH patient checks out, your office is missing out on its best opportunity to collect. If your software doesn’t allow you see patient balances, then consider a change in software.

Think about it. How hard is it to simply train your staff to look up with a smile and say, “Sir, would you like to take care of that outstanding balance today…we accept Visa and Discover”.

Believe me, your chances of collecting payment at that moment, with the patient standing in front of you wanting service, is far greater than trying to collect later.

Uncomfortable Collecting

Is your front office staff timid about asking for payments and collecting copays? Are they afraid of offending a new patient or telling that little old lady that she owes a high balance? Collecting comfort levels will inevitably vary among your staff, but it is critical that you, as the physician, explain to them that they work for a business and that collecting for payments for past service is a major part of keeping the lights on and paying the bills. Instill in your front office staff a spirit of meekness and gentleness along with a touch of boldness.

Is their any real difference between what we do and what Hollywood Video does when you stop in to rent a movie only to be hear the words, “Sorry, you owe us 2 weeks of late fees.”

Another important way to boost collections is by installing a credit card/debit machine at the front desk. If you haven’t done this, then you are missing a major source of revenue for your practice.

Patients today are very comfortable these machines, (this is the reason why they are everywhere) and most people prefer quick and easy methods of payment. Giving patients one more option or method of payment increases your chances of collecting from them.

Has anything changed?

Maintaining current information for each patient without a doubt is one of the most important pieces of data gathered by the front desk. Performing an insurance verification — before the patient arrives, if possible — is the best practice. Internet or electronic verification of coverage, benefits, and copay amount can be invaluable to the front-desk personnel. This information is generally printable and can then be reviewed for accuracy by the patient at the time of the appointment.

The repercussions from denied claims and incorrect patient addresses can be significant. If the front desk is not diligent about collecting current patient information, the claim may very likely be unpaid.

This is another situation where it is best to approach patients while they are at the front desk. It may be difficult and time-consuming to hunt them down in the office or make contact for this information once the appointment is over. After the service has been rendered, the patient is less motivated to comply with the practice's request for more information.

If patients show up for an appointment and have no insurance information (but say that they have insurance), have no referral, were involved in a motor vehicle accident, or are involved in a workers' compensation claim, it is imperative that the correct information or waivers be completed and signed by the patient. The waiver indicates that if the service is not covered by insurance, the patient will accept financial responsibility for the bill.

Patients without insurance should be asked to pay a minimum amount toward their visit ($50 for example); they can be billed for the remaining amount. The front-desk staff should help the patient understand that this minimum payment is not the entire amount due, because it would be unwise to speculate on the procedures, level of exam, or tests that may be run during the visit. You also do not want to create a false expectation for the patient or cause an unnecessary hardship for the provider if the bill is higher than estimated.

In Office Dispensing

What ever products you dispense in your offices, it is really important that you take the time to explain to your front office staff what these products are, their exact cost, along with their benefits. Why do this? Because after you spend 20 minutes explaining the product to the patient in the treatment room, they will inevitably want to hear it again when they leave and when they do, you don't want to hear…"I don't have a clue what that doo hitchie does, but it sure is expensive".

"Being on par in terms of price and quality only gets you into the game. Service wins the game." *Tony Alessandra*

Here are some pearls for your front office staff in maintaining a successful in office dispensing program.

- Don't overprice your products, thus putting your front office staff in the awkward position of explaining why your pad is 30.00 while at Wal-Mart it is 5.00.
- Have an easy to understand invoice/checkout sheet that displays the name of the product and its price.
- Create space (if possible) for smaller products at your front desk for last minute shoppers. Make sure it is a product that your front office staff uses (or is familiar with) so they can testify to its value.
- Make orthotics for your staff or give them your recommended OTC insoles to wear in their shoes. They will be your best source of referrals and plus they can testify to how good they feel.
- Try to sell products that are not available at other stores down the street. Train your staff to explain to patients why your products may be more expensive (i.e. convenience and compliance)
- Have a clear and easy to understand return policy for all the products you dispense. Make sure your staff knows the letter of law when it comes to these policies so you don't have to get caught in the middle of ever issue that arises.
- Reward staff members for initiating sales and for their positive comments.

Despite the best training and the most efficient protocols, there will be times when your front desk staff will not be able to prevent the occasional upset patient or the nonpayment for services rendered. However, instilling pride in what they do as well as equipping them with solid customer service strategies will help them maximize opportunities for collection.

"To give real service you must add something which cannot be bought or measured with money, and that is sincerity and integrity." *Donald A. Adams*