

Outcomes Assessment Survey to Determine Patient Satisfaction

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Abstract

The dental healthcare marketplace is consumer driven. The astute practice manager monitors the effectiveness of patient care in terms of both the actual dental service rendered and the process used to deliver the service. One mechanism that can be helpful is the use of a patient satisfaction survey to determine the status of the relationship between the dental practice and patient's of record. This article presents a perspective on the importance of patient feedback as well as a sample survey form that may be useful to the practicing dental professional.

Keywords: Outcomes assessment, patient satisfaction, doctor-patient relations

Introduction



Dental patients are better-informed consumers of dental services than they have been in the past. There are more dental practices available today, and patients can be more selective in their choice of a dental practitioner.

The present consumer-driven market has forced dental practices to respond to the personal needs of its patients in order to retain them in a practice for the long-term. There are numerous options for patients seeking dental treatment, and dental insurers are being selective about practices that are allowed to join a preferred provider network. It is truly a consumer's marketplace, and the dentist and his/her professional staff must be patient-centered if they are to succeed in developing a positive doctor-patient relationship. This is essential for retaining patients in the practice, the acceptance of treatment recommendations, and in managing risk in today's litigious social climate. Patient-centered care is now a matter of providing quality care in terms of the performance of dental procedures coupled with a caring manner in which those procedures are performed.

Use of a Survey Questionnaire

The patient (a.k.a the client, or the customer) is a valuable information source for feedback to a dental practice on how to improve access to care and treatment services. Use of a well-designed patient survey form can be an invaluable asset to the dentist and the dental staff to obtain meaningful information from the clientele of the practice including receiving kudos for a well-run dental practice.



A favorable survey should include the following features:

- Concise questions that address the topics of concern to the practice.
- Address only one issue per question to avoid confusing data.
- Limit the number of questions to maximize the response rate.
- Design a patient response scale that is simple, descriptive, and minimizes ambiguity.
- Include essential instructions for completing the survey and returning it to the practice.
- Provide space for patients to write comments at the end of the document.
- Do not require patients to sign the survey or to identify themselves.
- Do indicate the information provided will be managed in a confidential manner.

Methods of Using Survey Questionnaires

Survey forms can be found in practice management publications or can be custom designed to meet a specific need. First, the kind of information you want to obtain needs to be identified. Then either find or create a survey form that will collect that information. Upon receipt of the completed survey, simply tabulate the question responses, read the comments, and make any necessary adjustments in your practice. You might even find out what a great office you have. Alternately, you can develop a survey that is more scientific and requires additional data processing. The following are examples of two such ways to collect this information and make interpretations:



The Mailed Survey

Mailed surveys are expensive so care should be given in determining the number of survey forms needed to be sent to obtain a meaningful or representative sample. The following are some general survey suggestions to achieve a representative sample and maximize the return rate:

- Send a questionnaire to approximately 20-25% of your currently active patients. (Patients seen in the practice at least once during the past two years would be considered a good guide to determine the "active" status of a patient.)
- From the active patient list, select 20-25% of the active patient names in a random fashion to avoid skewing the results. For example, pick every fifth name on the list until you obtain the sample size you desire. It does not matter if you select two adults from the same household, since they may feel differently about their dental experiences.

- Prepare and mail the surveys at the same time so the results reflect "one point in time."
- Provide a postage-paid return, self-addressed mailer for the patient to return the survey.
- Consider providing a small incentive for responding to the questionnaire such as a dental care kit or a discount on their next dental prophylaxis.
- Consider a follow-up postcard reminder that states, "If you have not completed the survey, please take a few minutes to do so. The information will assist us in assuring we provide the best service possible to our patients."

The Personal Input Survey

A survey questionnaire can be distributed to patients for completion while they are waiting for their appointment rather than mailing it to them. Alternately, portions of the sample questionnaire (Table 3, to be discussed below) could be copied from this article, customized, and then added to a dental office web site for ongoing input from patients. Patients could access the web site from home using the Internet or by using a computer made available to them in the dental office during an appointment. This strategy would eliminate mailing costs and provide data for the practice to continuously monitor patient opinions of the practice. This personal input survey technique tends to increase the response rate. However, care must be taken to provide for patient anonymity in order to obtain candid responses.

Data Processing

Once the surveys are returned, the information has to be compiled into some meaningful format. The most common strategy, while not the only one, is to simply indicate the percentage of responses to each choice after each question. It is a good idea to include a column for "No Response" (NR) in case a patient fails to fill in all responses. A short example of a data sheet is shown in Table 1. These can be produced manually or by using computer software. If a spreadsheet, as shown above, is used for tabulating the questionnaire's responses, the results are more obvious than just sifting through stacks of surveys as they are returned.

Table 1. Sample Data Sheet (Spreadsheet)

Question	NR	% E	% D	% C	% B	% A
How easy was it to make an initial appointment?	5	10	25	30	20	10
Were the forms you filled out easy to understand?	0	0	45	25	25	5
Was the parking convenient?	10	40	45	5	0	0

Interpretation

Surveys can be scientific in nature and the results analyzed by a statistician in order to arrive at a scientific conclusion. However, most dentists are simply attempting to identify the desirable and undesirable characteristics of their practices as



perceived by a representative sample of patients. With that knowledge in hand, they can respond appropriately to the findings. Each practitioner must interpret the data based on the context in

which the practice operates. For example, Table 1 (as discussed above) would indicate some patients perceive parking as a problem. That might be true in a rural setting, however, if the practice is located in downtown Manhattan where parking is almost non-existent, the fact that half of the respondents felt parking was adequate or favorable and 10% did not respond might be an acceptable result. It could also mean the practice needs to offer validated parking, subway tokens, or bus passes to patients in order to alleviate the patient's transportation problem. Surveys provide information. The dentist must interpret the information and respond accordingly. The survey can be used as a discussion for staff meetings, and the results can lead to further interactions between the members of the office.

Sample Surveys

A sample questionnaire designed to obtain feedback from patients is provided in Table 2. This simple example can be used in any of the survey strategies described.

Table 2. A Sample Survey Form

Patient Satisfaction Survey					
In order to provide you with the best dental services possible, we want to know how well we are doing now and what we might do better from your point of view. Please take a couple of minutes to provide us with important information to assist us in our effort to better serve you					
Grade us by circling either A, B, C, D or E after each question.					
A= Excellent, B= Very Favorable, C= Favorable, D= Adequate, E= Inadequate					
If you would like to add some constructive suggestions or comments, please feel free to do so in the space provided at the end of this questionnaire.					
How easy was it to make an initial appointment?	A	B	C	D	E
Were the forms you filled out easy to understand?	A	B	C	D	E
Was the parking convenient?	A	B	C	D	E
Was the reception area welcoming?	A	B	C	D	E
Was the receptionist pleasant and helpful?	A	B	C	D	E
Did you find the treatment area non-threatening?	A	B	C	D	E
Did the dental care providers (dentist, hygienist, assistants) treat you as you wanted to be treated during your visit?	A	B	C	D	E
Does the business operation of the dental office manage your account appropriately?	A	B	C	D	E
Would you recommend this practice to your family and friends?	A	B	C	D	E
Comments: _____					

Thanks for your time!					

Conclusion

Patient satisfaction surveys can be an invaluable management tool if they are well designed, the

information interpreted properly, and the response to the findings appropriate.

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