

Your Practice *Needs* an Office Manager

By Kevin Henry

As the managing editor for *Dental Economics*, one of the things I see from dental offices around the country is that practices are constantly trying to figure out how to differentiate themselves from the practice down the street. Is it a new sign out front? Is it a bigger TV and more beverage choices in the reception area? Is it the newest technological advance in dentistry that can be incorporated into the practice?

Everyone is always looking for a hook to reach patients, whether they are new patients, ones who haven't been in the practice for some time, or those who are consistent, valued customers. One thing that is often overlooked in a dental practice that can make a huge difference in the patient's mind is simple and genuine interaction between the team and the individual sitting in the chair.

Sounds simple, right? Absolutely ... so why isn't it being done in so many practices? Much of that has to do with the "roller skate" routine that so many dentists fall into over time. Run to this operatory, scoot over to this operatory, and make an appearance in the hygiene department before running back to Operatory 1. It's a hectic way of life that causes many problems within the practice.

Dentists get very little training on business in dental school (one of the primary reasons why *Dental Economics* has been such a mainstay in the dentist's library for decades), so suddenly having to run the practice and everything that goes with it can be overwhelming at times. That's where an office manager comes into the picture.

Why is it important to have an office manager in your practice?

1. An office manager handles the business for you.
2. An office manager lets you establish relationships.
3. An office manager provides an advocate for you within the practice.

But what really is an office manager? Is it just a title or a promotion for someone from the back office who seems better with numbers than instruments? Not at all. The office manager is someone who is a skilled businessperson and can look at a balance sheet the same way that he or she could if they were working at any business. An office manager is not someone who just answers the phones and tells people to have a seat in the reception area. Many dental practices have "office managers" who



can do that, but are they really managing the office or just managing the phone?

Many members of the American Association of Dental Office Managers (AADOM) have come into the dental field from outside dentistry. These men and women are skilled when it comes to making sure the practice is running at a profitable pace. Let's be honest ... I don't go to my accountant if I have a toothache and I don't go to my dentist if I need financial advice. Dentists are meticulously skilled at working in the mouth and have paid for years of college and countless CE courses to make sure they're good at what they do. So why shouldn't they be allowed to focus on those skills and using them for the utmost good of their patients? That's where the office manager comes in. He or she focuses on the numbers and the dollar signs. You can focus on dentistry. It's that simple.

"My first job as an office manager is to do everything in my power to make our team successful," said Melissa Erickson, the practice manager at Provinces Dental in Chandler, Ariz. "That's a huge umbrella, and there's a lot that falls under that for me. Everything from interpersonal conflicts to human resource issues to counseling and coaching is what I do on a daily basis. I am a bottom-line, business-is-business, black-and-white business manager."

An office manager lets you establish relationships with your patients because they are taking part of the practice's burden from you. With more time to focus on dentistry, you also have time to focus on patients. Your patients are the lifeblood of your practice. Actually, they're not just "patients." They're people who can influence their friends in a good or bad way toward your practice. They're customers who are looking for a good experience in a business in the same way they would if they walked into a Target, Home Depot or Starbucks. By not worrying about

the financial side of the practice, you have more freedom to make your customers feel important ... because they are.

One of the beautiful and often-overlooked assets of the office manager is that he or she becomes a trusted advocate for you in the practice. Being the boss of any company is a lonely business and the same holds true for the dentist. In offices where team members may have an "us versus them" mentality when it comes to their views of the dentist, the office manager can be the one person in the practice who stays out of the politics and focuses on the bottom line ... like you.

Having an office manager sounds great, right? Well, this is the part where I'm often asked two questions:

1. How much is it going to cost me?
2. Can I really trust someone with the financial details of my practice?

I'll address the second question first. Absolutely, you will have to trust this person with the most intimate details of your finances ... and it has to be a complete trust. You have to be willing to hand over the keys to the practice's financial car and let someone else drive it ... and you can't be a backseat driver. You have to remember that you are moving your business forward by concentrating on what you do best ... dentistry. You're also moving your business forward by letting someone else concentrate on what they do best ... focus on numbers.

Make no mistake about it – an office manager is going to be an extra salary for your practice and it may take a hard swallow to decide that you're really going to spend the money to bring in another person who will have no role in the operator. However, you have to look at the ROI of having someone else take the financial worry away from your mind. Peace of mind is a priceless thing. Jeffrey Hayzlett, the former chief marketing officer for Kodak, once said that ROI could also be translated into the "return on ignoring." How much is your practice missing because it's running the same way it's always run?

Regarding salaries, Kip Tindell, the CEO of The Container Store, recently said, "One great person equals three good people. Following that logic, you can pay great employees double and still come out ahead."

Of course, you also have to know where to find a great office manager. My advice is to look in the same places where you'd find any other type of great employee. Look outside dentistry and into other fields to find someone who is good at what they do (crunching numbers and solving problems) and see if they're ready for a new challenge. Also, don't hesitate to contact the AADOM if you're looking for some leads. This group has grown exponentially over the last few years and is now "the place" for dental office managers to network.

Speaking of the AADOM, I would also strongly advise you to have your office manager become a member of that organization. In the same way that hygienists and assistants can evolve into better team members by attending courses designed for them, the office manager can learn from his or her peers through this organization that offers virtual study clubs, an annual meeting and even certification (Fellowship) when they have completed the corresponding curriculum. The added plus – Patterson and AADOM have become solid business partners, with Patterson being the exclusive Diamond Sponsor of the association. Their level of commitment to providing resources to this very important position in the office is obviously the way they are partnering with AADOM. From being a resource for local study clubs to offering scholarships to the annual conference, Patterson has stepped up to the plate to recognize the importance of this position in the dental industry.

What's the bottom line? A strong office manager can take the financial worry away from you and become one of the biggest assets you have in your practice. You can focus on your job and customers will feel the difference when they step through the door.



Kevin Henry has worked at PennWell Corporation in Tulsa, Okla., for more than 10 years and currently serves as the editor of *Dental Assisting Digest* and *Proofs*, as well as the managing editor of *Dental Economics*. Kevin earned his bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Tulsa and received his master's degree in communications from the University of Oklahoma. He can be reached by email at kevinh@pennwell.com.

