



HOW-TO

5 Ways to Encourage Patient Referrals

By Lee Ann Brady, DMD

We all know how much of a challenge it is to attract new patients to your practice. One of the most effective — and least expensive — ways to do so is to let your existing patients do the work for you. Every practice has patients that are more loyal than others. But how do you go about finding them, then encouraging them to refer to you? Here are five specific steps to put you on the road to a killer patient referral program.

Step 1: Target the cream of the crop

First, identify those patients you feel are the most loyal — your best customers. What is the definition of “best” customer? Look for a combination of the following attributes:

1. Frequency — Select those who visit most often; they keep coming back to you for a reason.
2. Recency — Choose patients who have been in for an appointment most recently. Avoid those you haven't seen in 8-10 months.
3. Purchase Behavior — Look for those who tend to follow through with recommended treatment.

Step 2: Choose your carrot wisely

Dangling a carrot (or incentive) in front of your best patients may motivate them to help you. However, you want to make sure that you offer an incentive that your patients will actually be interested in. There are some rules to follow to make sure that the incentives you offer are good for your patients and relate to your practice. To summarize:

1. Offer incentives that relate to your products or services.
2. Offer incentives that make it easier for patients to strongly recommend friends, family & coworkers to your practice.
3. The incentive needs to be appropriate for the patient group you identified.
4. The incentive needs to be simple to articulate and understand.
5. Patients refer as a way to support you when they appreciate you and the team. Referral incentives are a fun way to ask for referrals and say thank you when they occur. Offices use anything, from Starbucks cards to drawings for an iPad. You can increase the incentive based on the number of people a patient refers.

Step 3: Dangle the carrot — Ask your most loyal patients to recommend you.

What types of things could you ask your patients to do to help you grow your business?

1. Post a positive review about their experience on Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, Yelp, etc.
2. Promote a new patient offer (like a special discount) via email. Ask your patients to share the offer on their Facebook page, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.
3. Ask patients to refer friends and family to your practice.
4. Give your patient a coupon and include an extra for a friend. Code them if you can so you can give your patient credit for sharing with a thank you reward.

Step 4: Reward your best patients for helping you out

After your best patients have referred to you, make sure you follow through with your gratitude and their reward. Follow through is very important here — make sure you have a fail-safe process for delivering their incentive with a thank you. If you have a marketing automation system, this is easy to set up. If you don't, you'll need to find another method to track customer behavior.

Step 5: Continue to nurture the relationship

Continue engaging with your best patients to further nurture your positive relationship. Consider custom messaging, thanking them for their loyalty, or custom content based on their behavior — making them feel special can go a long way.

It goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway)...your loyal patients are your practice's best asset. So treat them accordingly and they'll sing your praises. All they need is a little encouragement to do so.