

Connecting with your patients

Are your patients failing to respond to your reminder letters? Ashley Latter describes a simple but effective way to fill your diary

I have spoken to many dental professionals in Ireland who confirmed they have noticed that their appointment book is not as full as it once was.

It seems that patients have been putting off their dental check-ups, with hygiene appointments being particularly badly affected, because of the recession.

Over the course of two days in April of this year, I worked with a practice in Dublin. The team told me that there was a major problem in that patients were not responding to the letters that the practice was sending out and, as a result, many gaps had appeared in their diary.

In fact, it meant that income was 25% down from previous months. This problem was getting worse and there were times when the book was empty for a few hours at a time.

We sat down and worked out a strategy together. It was

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so simple and ultimately so effective. Instead of sending out letters, the team took it in turns to telephone the patients at home, to remind them that their appointment was now due and to explain the importance of maintaining regular appointments.

During the call they asked the patient to get their diary, so that they could book their appointment there and then. The team were, of course, both courteous and friendly, and the results were amazing.

Virtually every patient they contacted booked an appointment. Interestingly, many of the patients thanked the practice for the telephone call and the reminder.

The team had no negative feedback at all, which they were surprised about, because they were expecting some of their patients to be a bit rude or off-hand, as they were receiving a call at home, potentially disturbing their plans for the evening.

The team in the practice worked in shifts, so that telephone calls could be made out of surgery hours, allowing them to speak directly to the patient rather than leaving a message. They even contacted patients that had not been to the practice for several years and were amazed how many patients actually made an appointment to see them.

The results were outstanding and the book went from being half empty to almost full and, what's more, there were only a handful of cancellations and no-shows.

The team also found that in the long run the calling system was saving a great deal of time, as they did not have to print off letters, put them in envelopes and post them. They also found that they were saving money, as it was cheaper to ring the clients rather than sending out letters.

I spoke to the practice manager only last month and

she reported that they had near record months in July and August. September was also good, plus she commented on the fact that the practice had also seen an increase in uptake of treatment plans, as patients had been encouraged to discuss any problems that they felt they had. It was a great result and it really did make my day.

There is a very famous quote from one of the world's leading personal development trainers – Anthony Robbins – who says: 'If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got'.

When the economy experiences a downturn, everything changes. You cannot expect to get the same results using the same methods. You have to become proactive, think outside the box and take decisive action. Standing still is simply not an option. 📞