

# **“Be My Guest”: Giving Patients the VIP Treatment**

Robert H. Maccario, MBA

The last time you checked into a hotel, what was one of the first things you did as you approached the registration desk? You probably reached for your wallet. Would it even have occurred to you to be offended by the clerk’s polite request that you establish credit before receiving your room key?

In the business world, customers routinely pay, or at least provide a credit-card guarantee, before receiving goods and services. However, these same people can act indignant when asked to pay in advance at the dentist’s office. What’s the difference? We know your patients have been to hotels; probably many of them are hotel regulars. Then why the righteous anger in the dental office?

There are two reasons, and both concern your relationship with those patients. In the hotel environment, patrons are guests and know it. They are willing to trade their advance payment for the anticipated value of the guest experience. In your dental practice, patrons don’t consider themselves guests — mainly because you don’t provide them with a guest experience.

The other reason involves expectations, too: the way they arrived at your door. In many cases, an insurance company sends the patient to you. (Not much positive anticipation there!) In the hotel business, guests choose where to stay. Hotels invest significant marketing dollars in developing a brand identity to directly influence the expectations of their guests. On the other hand, the dental practice that allows insurance companies to set customer expectations becomes a mere commodity. Insurance companies spend millions of marketing dollars to attract customers to *their* insurance programs, developing *their* brand identity in the process. They promote the value of *their* services, placing their emphasis on what they sell: security and convenience at a perceived cost-effective rate. Patient care is buried somewhere in the mix, since the focus

is on the value of *their* network, not the advantages of each dentist. As a result, they are able to place a higher dollar value on *their* insurance premiums, leaving the dentist/dental care in the role of mere provider.

### **Turning Your Patients into Guests**

What do you associate with the word *patient*? Probably words like *ill*, *dependent*, and *in need of assistance*. Most people's emotional reaction to the word ranges from sadness and concern to uncertainty. But when you hear the word *guest*, what is your reaction? Do you think of more positive things, such as *invitation*, *valued friends*, *excitement*, *anticipation*, *someone to be enjoyed*, and *someone to look forward to meeting*? Plus the advantages of being treated as someone who is special (not pathetic), welcome (not burdensome) and highly valued (not pitied), right?

If you want to compete in the new business environment, the entire dental team must shift from taking care of patients to welcoming guests. Of course, you are in the healthcare industry, and as a medical professional you will always be dealing with patients, but their identity doesn't have to stop there: Consider your patients as guests, too.

Converting your patients into guests goes far beyond using different words and employing a simple customer-service orientation. It requires a commitment to create a complete guest experience for them, an environment where their needs are anticipated and expectations are exceeded — plus they feel that they have one of the best dentists in town. You want to be the Ritz-Carlton of teeth.

Seem a little much for your practice? Orchestrating events to generate a particular experience is not limited only to luxury industries, nor to dental offices in the wealthiest communities and most expensive neighborhoods. Progressive dental practices should not limit themselves by thinking only of high-cost experiences. Creating sound customer service and designing the guest experience can go far beyond fantasizing about how you might want to be treated at a luxury hotel, world-class spa or fine restaurant. Although these establishments can provide you with excellent examples, think about some of the everyday experiences that have been made special by the people providing services. A

simple repetitive task made less painful in the day-to-day rush can be a great source of increased value to your patient and enhance your brand identity.

One service you could institute is the VIP express checkout, which is rapidly becoming a standard in companies that serve repeat customers. You have probably noticed that in most well-run hotels, and almost every car-rental agency, a special class of guests are not kept waiting at the counter to check out. They have pre-approved their purchases, the company has the credit card on file, and they get to waltz in and out of the establishment with less hassle and time spent on repetitive paperwork.

We have taken that idea and incorporated it into our Dental Concierge® concepts. The Dental Concierge® CASH Practice System is a customer-service training program directed at eliminating statements, reducing accounts receivable and minimizing insurance dependency. Many dental practices have adopted this VIP express checkout to increase the patients' perception of special treatment. Many patients consider it a great convenience to keep a credit card number and signed pre-authorization on file — and as guests, they have come to expect it.

No matter where they are, whether it's a premium hotel or your dental office, most people would rather feel like a guest than a patient. And if you want them to pay in advance, see you for more than basic “mouth maintenance,” and value their medical care over the supposed services of an insurance company, you need to give them what they want.

Everybody loves the VIP treatment. Consider what you can do for the people in your office to help them not only appreciate your excellent clinical skills but also feel welcome and extravagantly cared for. When people come to *know* they are your guests (not because you tell them but because they experience it), most will behave as guests: paying up front, seeking comprehensive care, and raving about you to their friends and family. In the end, you get the VIP treatment, too!

Bob Maccario, MBA

(800) 332-0363.