

# DocTalk

SPECIAL  
EDITION

*Exclusively for Dental Health Services Participating Dentists and Their Staff*

## 10 Ways to Keep Your Patients Smiling

*Build stronger patient relationships with these simple steps*

A satisfied patient is one that comes back to your office, year after year. Make sure you're putting your best foot forward by following these tips that will help keep your patients smiling:

**1. Practice phone courtesy.** Speak clearly and be alert. Act interested, friendly, and cheerful. Be polite, and try to keep interruptions to a minimum.

**2. Greet your patients when they come in the door.** Let them know that you recognize them, that they matter, and that you care.

**3. Keep waiting patients informed.** Cut down frustration levels. If people know why they are waiting, they will be more tolerant of the delay. If the wait will be extremely long, consider alternatives in scheduling.

**4. Introduce yourself.** Giving people your name is a friendly gesture that relaxes patients and lets them know that you hope for a relationship based on mutual respect.

**5. Call your patients by name whenever possible.** Doing so gives them the sense

that they are unique and being served personally.

**6. Be prepared.** Preparation prevents confusion and mistakes, improves patient confidence, and leads to better scheduling and increased productivity.

**7. Inform them about what you are doing and why.** Your patients have a right to know what is happening. Uncertainty creates fear and anxiety, while information enhances cooperation.

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# Be the Patient: Handshakes, Sensitivity Boost, and Doctor-Patient Rapport

Patients look to establish a personal relationship with their doctors. Simple actions such as shaking hands and greeting patients by their first name allow patients to feel important.

“The first few moments of a medical encounter are critical to establishing a rapport, making the patient feel comfortable and setting the tone of the interview (appointment),” wrote a team at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago.\*

This team surveyed 415 adults about their expectations and preferences for being greeted by doctors and found:

- Just over 78% wanted doctors to shake their hands
- More than half wanted their first names used during greetings, and nearly a quarter wanted doctors to use both their first and last names
- Just over 56% of patients wanted doctors to introduce themselves using first and last names, 32.5% wanted doctors to use their last name, and about 7% wanted doctors to use their first name

The researchers also video-taped 123 new patient visits with 19 different doctors. They found that:

- Doctors shook hands with patients about 83% of the time
- In over half of the visits, doctors did not mention patients’ names at all
- Doctors used their first and last names when introducing themselves in 58.8% of the meetings, and did not introduce themselves at all in about 11% of the visits

“Physicians should be encouraged to shake hands with patients but remain sensitive to non verbal clues that might indicate whether patients are open to this behavior,” the study researchers wrote.

“Given the diversity of opinion regarding the use of names, coupled with national patient safety recommendations concerning patient identification, we suggest that physicians initially use patients’ first and last names.”

We move through life encountering new situations and people that require us to adapt to these environments—wouldn’t you want to be greeted with a smile and a personal greeting if you were in this situation? The little details make a BIG difference. •

\*Data published in the *Journal Archives of Internal Medicine*, June 11, 2007.

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**8. Provide clear and adequate instructions.** Provide concise but complete instructions as to where your patient should go, or what they should do. Confusion is always counterproductive.

**9. Respect their privacy.** Realize that speaking loudly about a patient’s problems, or discussing them in front of strangers, may cause tension and anxiety. Patients need to know that information about their lives will be kept in the strictest confidence.

**10. Ask patients for their questions, educate.** Offering information can ease anxieties, making it easier for patients to help themselves and make more informed choices. Patients need and expect to be treated as people who matter.

These tips can be used by everyone in your office, from receptionists to treatment coordinators, assistants, hygienists, and dentists. They can help keep your patients smiling — and returning. •