

How to Optimize



The hygiene department is a critical element to your business success as a general dentist.

Hygiene, as a Pinnacle

Practices consultant would say,

“is the fuel that drives the bus.”

Why? Your hygiene department

is where patient loyalty is built,

case acceptance is cultivated,

restorative treatment needs are

uncovered, and production is

generated.

Your Hygiene Department

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Case Acceptance and Hygiene

Let's begin with case acceptance. Case acceptance is defined by getting your patients to say "yes" to the recommended treatment, scheduling the necessary appointments, and having the work done. Case acceptance is a challenge for dental practices everywhere. According to American Dental Association (<http://www.ada.org>) research, the national average for case acceptance is 68% based on annual revenue divided by diagnosed treatment. According to a 2006 client audit by Pinnacle Practices, the average (1 year among an active client base) unscheduled treatment in a practice equals \$1,249,817.

Successful case acceptance is predicated on patient trust and understanding. Patient trust is built with frequency and consistency. Patient understanding is achieved when you communicate clearly, candidly, and compassionately. Your patients are going to see your hygienists more than anyone else in your practice. Time spent in the hygiene chair is time available to probe, lis-

ten, and learn who your patients are. What are their needs, concerns, motivations, and desires? Who are they, how do they like to be treated, and how can you build their loyalty?

Patients typically feel more comfortable communicating with hygienists than with doctors. People are conditioned to respect doctors and give them immediate credibility because of their education and professional status. Credibility is valuable but should not be confused with trust. How many times has the following occurred in your practice? You present your recommended treatment to the patient who appears to be engaged and listening. The patient agrees, nods their head in agreement, and tells you that they are going to proceed with your recommendations...only they never show up again at your practice. What happened? It could mean that they did not trust you enough to follow through with your recommendations. People generally buy services from people they trust and believe in. The hygiene department is the cornerstone to building that trust.



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	Per Day		Per Week (X4)		Per Month (X4)		Per Year (X12)	
	No-shows/ Cancellations	Lost Production, \$ (\$100 per visit)						
1 Hygienist	2	200	8	800	32	3,200	384	38,400
2 Hygienists	4	400	16	1,600	64	6,400	768	76,800
3 Hygienists	6	600	24	2,400	96	9,600	1152	115,200

This loss in production does not factor in any of the restorative needs uncovered throughout a hygiene appointment.

The goal for your hygienists regarding case acceptance is to build a loyal, trusting relationship with your patients and to educate them on dentistry. Your goal as a dentist is to lead, diagnose, and treat. Many dentists feel overwhelmed and overburdened with the perception that they have to “sell” their dentistry. We don’t believe that selling dentistry is why you went to dental school, nor is it a core competency. Case acceptance is not about selling, it’s about communicating, connecting, and taking great care of your patients’ oral and systemic health.

Practices that excel in case acceptance are those that recognize and respect the power of a great dental team. An effective dental team works together, focuses on patient satisfaction, provides patients with a consistent message, and makes their patients feel important. It is imperative that you and your hygienists share the same treatment philosophy and communicate a consistent message to your patients. What is your soft-tissue management philosophy? What is your clinical philosophy regarding inlays, onlays, and crowns? What is your clinical philosophy regarding implants and bridges? When your hygienist is probing and educating your patients on their oral health, they should be conveying the same information that you would communicate. Inconsistent information will confuse your patients and make case acceptance more difficult. You don’t see your patients with enough frequency to risk confusing them.

Production and Hygiene

A typical work schedule for a hygienist is 8 hours per day, 4 work days per week. Ideally, every hygienist should see 8 patients per working day with the production goal of uncovering at least 1 to 2 restorative needs

per patient. This is the fuel that drives your business and builds your future.

A good rule of thumb is to have 1 hygienist for every 800 active patients. For success, each hygienist’s schedule must be full. No-shows and cancellations plague the hygiene schedule and compromise production goals. It is important for a dental practice to reinforce the value of their hygiene department by implementing and communicating a financial fee for missed hygiene appointments. When you do not hold patients accountable for breaking the schedule, you reinforce the perception that hygiene appointments are of low value. The Table above shows the financial impact of no-shows and cancellations.

One of the keys to your success as a dentist and business owner is to hire and train hygienists who believe in your clinical philosophy, understand the importance of their role, build trusting relationships with patients, listen, and educate.

Your practice should strive for a 90% patient show rate for your hygiene department. Implementing a cancellation fee is a Band-Aid fix to a systemic problem. It’s all about relationships, and getting your practice to a 90% show rate is going to take commitment and effort. One of Pinnacle’s proven strategies to attain this

goal is to hire and train a hygiene coordinator. A hygiene coordinator has 3 main priorities:

Patient Liaison. The hygiene coordinator is your patient liaison, responsible for managing the hygiene schedule and building relationships with your patient base. What do your patients want? They appreciate friendly, flexible service that is tailored to their specific needs. Your patients, like most Americans today, have enough stress in their daily lives that dedicating time to see their dentist is not the highest priority. For your patients to make it a priority, you have to make them feel that they are important and you are there specifically to take great care of them.

Getting New Patients in the Door. When a new patient calls your practice, they should be transferred to the hygiene coordinator (patient liaison) to begin the relationship building process. The goal of this initial call is to get the potential new patient to commit to an appointment, ideally within 6 business days. Scheduling the initial appointment beyond 6 business days does not reinforce the patient focus and sense of priority that you are trying to establish. You should not end the initial call until you have made a connection with the patient, learned why they are calling, determined the last time they have seen a dentist, and clearly understand their needs. The potential patient should understand the benefits you can provide during that first call.

Managing the Hygiene Patient Mix. The goal is to fill the schedule, but not just with the same patients repeatedly. There are 2 facets to the hygiene schedule that need to be balanced. The first is the mix of patients of record: current patients, past-due patients, and inactive patients. Regular hygiene appointments should be scheduled for 45 minutes to 1 hour. From the patients-of-record group, the hygiene coordinator should strive for 33% current patients, 33% past-due patients, and 33% inactive patients. The protocol we recommend is to make 2 contacts (actually speak with a patient) for every available time slot. The second facet is the new-patient and Quad Scale appointments, which should be scheduled for 1.5 hours each. Optimally, you should schedule at least 1 new-patient and 1 Quad Scale appointment per working day per hygienist.

Hygiene Coordinator Expectations

1. Schedule the hygienist(s) to see an average of 7 to 8 patients per day.
2. Make the contacts required per day, per hygienist, and per doctor to maintain the schedule and a 90% show rate.
3. Fill hygiene no-shows and cancellations.
4. Answer all hygiene and new-patient phone calls.
5. If using a manual recall system, have a recall card created for every patient.
6. Use and manage patient marketing software, such as Smile Reminder (www.smilereminder.com), to maintain consistent contact with your patient base (phone, e-mail, text messages, patient satisfaction surveys, promotions, practice newsletters, etc).
7. Send out patient thank you and birthday correspondence.
8. Maintain the recall system.
9. Confirm the hygiene schedule.
10. Maintain a positive attitude and always answer the telephone with a smile.
11. Be a team player.
12. Communicate effectively with all team members.
13. Attend daily team meetings.
14. Develop and implement internal marketing projects for the practice.
15. Maintain the hygiene-related content on your practice's Web site.

Provided courtesy of Pinnacle Practices, Inc.

Hygienists are valuable contributors to your patients, your team, your dentistry, and your business. One of the keys to your success as a dentist and business owner is to hire and train hygienists who believe in your clinical philosophy, understand the importance of their role, build trusting relationships with patients, listen, and educate. Your hygiene department should not be viewed as a prophylaxis factory, but as an opportunity for trusted relationships to be cultivated, restorative needs to be uncovered, and dental education to begin. Great hygienists can make your job of running a dental business easier and more gratifying. Good luck, and please contact us if we can be of further assistance to you. ■