

# INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

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## MANAGING FOR SUCCESS

### REAL SOLUTIONS

## Dentist: Staff Communication At Root Of Customer Care

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INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

It's easy to forget under the glare of a dental lamp or the whine of a drill, but your dentist's office is a business.

And a demanding one, at that, since dentistry is all about customer relationships.

If a patient is dealt with politely and professionally in the course of an involved, costly and sometimes painful dental treatment, he's likely to come back, studies have shown.

Successful dentists have honed patient relations to a fine art. That makes dentists a rich source of tips for all businesses looking to serve customers better.

Alan Goldstein, who runs Laserdentalcare on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York City, is one such dentist.

"From what I've studied about business, it's clear the relationships we have with customers are the driver for success," Goldstein said.

From this standpoint, a dental team fussing over a patient isn't that different from a squad of software designers working closely with a client.

For starters, Goldstein believes nurturing good patient/dentist relations is about holding effective staff meetings. "The best way for businesses to build value is to build value with their staff. And patient satisfaction is the best mirror for this success," he said.

Goldstein works with two other dentists and six employees who staff the front desk or work as dental assistants.

He holds two one-hour meetings a week. "Staff meetings are a way to expose problems people have with leadership in the office. This is



Alan Goldstein, head of a dental care practice in New York City, chats with Andrienne Hall, patient coordinator and dental assistant.

whether it involves myself — the leader of the practice — or anyone else. Unlike the 'don't question what I say' leadership model, this model can be questioned all the time," Goldstein said.

He says staffers also do active role playing. They act out ways to behave when patients come in for treatment. They also rehearse with each other in using the right language with patients in dental situations.

"If someone calls about a toothache, the first comment has to be one of empathy. The first thing to say is, 'Sorry to hear you have a toothache,'" Goldstein said.

In another case, Goldstein says he recently saw a young woman who hadn't been to the dentist in 12 years.

"When people say that, they expect to be chastised. My approach is to say, 'Well, maybe you can share with me the reason you didn't go to the dentist that long,'" Goldstein said, "I get people to talk about it. If they're scared of the dentist, I find out what they're scared of."

The other thing staffers practice is taking control.

They learn that the person asking the questions is the one in control of the situation.

A front-desk receptionist, for example, will be coached to establish rapport and get the details of a patient's condition by asking the right questions in the right manner. This way, patients feel they've made an upbeat connection with the dentist before they come in.

Goldstein has crunched down what he's learned into 11 essential rules for keeping employees focused on customer satisfaction:

■ **Punctuality.** All sessions with patients start and end on time. No one likes to be kept waiting in a dental chair or kept overtime. "We don't try to be on time; we are on time," Goldstein said.

■ **No interruptions at staff meetings.** Goldstein sends incoming phone calls to an answering machine during meetings. This lets everyone know he's serious about staff meetings. He says it also impresses patients.

■ **No titles, no privileges at meetings.** Everyone checks

titles and privileges at the door. At an effective staff meeting, everyone is equal, Goldstein says. There's a designated leader for each meeting, and that job rotates. The leader is responsible for creating an atmosphere of openness and frankness.

■ **No hanging back, no monopolizing.** Participation in the meetings is not optional. Some dentists, Goldstein said, suffer from a condition he calls "mouth openitis." Dentists are used to talking in a dental office, and the meetings are a good way to make them shut up and listen.

■ **Always have a written agenda.** Agendas help track the problems staffers are trying to solve.

■ **Talk openly about issues.** Elicit the thoughts and feelings of each and every staff member.

■ **No defensiveness permitted.** Staffers aren't allowed to be self-protecting, nor are they allowed to use "attacking" criticism. No complaint sessions allowed.

■ **Support the facilitator.** Staffers support the facilitator by following meeting rules.

■ **Leadership training.** Encourage staffers to keep broadening their skills. Increase self-esteem and help them grow in their jobs.

■ **Stress communication skills.** Encourage everyone to speak and write clearly.

■ **Encourage humor.** Use humor to offset the intensity of staff meetings.

More details on Goldstein's rules for effective staff meetings are available at coaching-practice.com, a Web site he runs.