In recent years, the orthodontic field has become very competitive. Now more than ever, orthodontists need to focus on what will make their practices stand out and appeal to potential new patients.

Surprisingly, the lowest fee is not always the ideal differentiator. In these difficult economic times, people do want the best value, but how they feel about your office and how they are treated by you and your staff is as important as—if not more important than—low price. From the moment the office opens until it closes, you and your team are in the spotlight. You must be ready to give patients the best experience possible.
Ask yourself the following questions about your practice:

- Are efficient systems in place?
- Do the team members support you, as well as each other?
- Do you empower and trust your team?
- How is communication within the office as well as outside of the office?
- Is the office atmosphere warm and friendly, or cold and clinical?
- Do all the conversations include the patient or parent as a participant? Or do you find the staff gossiping or discussing personal issues within earshot of the patient?
- Does the practice have outdated equipment, or are outdated procedures performed?

The patients and parents who come to your office will be able to answer these questions. You, of course, would want them answered in a positive way. You want the office to have that *wow* factor from the first time a prospective patient calls and throughout the entire course of treatment. Many orthodontists have only so-so experiences for their patients. Differentiate your practice by going above and beyond expectations and creating a great experience.

**Customer service extends to the atmosphere you create in your office. It’s easy to forget we are treating people, and not just teeth.**

**Making it great, right out of the gate**

First, impress new patients by having efficient systems in place. Efficiency should start the moment a new patient calls: The receptionist should get the necessary information while connecting on a personal level. This conversation should go beyond the time and date of the initial appointment. Who referred the patient to the office? Are there other age-appropriate children he or she would like to bring to the exam? Has he or she seen an orthodontist before, and if so, was treatment recommended?

The receptionist should obtain all insurance information on this initial call so the treatment coordinator can verify benefits prior to the consultation. If the information is collected at the outset, it will set the stage for the doctor, the treatment coordinator, and the patient to have an efficient and productive new-patient exam experience.

Of course, this efficient new-patient process is just the beginning. Once the patient has started treatment, it is important to continue using efficient systems throughout the entire orthodontic experience. Creating a scheduling template that allows for efficient patient flow and minimal patient wait time is imperative to the success of a practice. It’s important to remember that patients and parents arrange their busy schedules to accommodate appointments, and they expect the same consideration in return. They want to be in and out of the office as quickly as possible, with minimal wait times. If you operate an efficient schedule, the patients and parents are happy, and their happiness equates to increased patient referrals and revenue.

Exceptional customer service starts with the new-patient call, as well. Did the receptionist make the patient on the other end of the phone feel like he or she is important? Or did the patient feel as if the call was an interruption or a bother?
Getting the team on track

Your practice can take customer service, as well as communication, to another level by calling the patient’s general dentist the day before the exam. During this call, the treatment coordinator should ask if any unfinished dental work should be addressed prior to starting orthodontic treatment, and the date of the patient’s last cleaning. The patient will be impressed by your attention to detail. If the dental office is the referral source, this call is also the perfect opportunity to thank them for the referral, to let them know how much you appreciate their support, and to set the stage for future referrals.

Communication between everyone—the doctor, staff, patient, parents, and general dentist—is imperative in a successful practice. Communication can include letters, charting, emails, phone calls, a kind note or gesture, morning huddles, staff meetings, team-building exercises, and more. Communicating with patients and parents should come easily and be genuine. Patients should be greeted by name whenever possible, especially when they first enter the office and when walking out the door.

One of the best forms of communication that serves as exceptional customer service is to have assistants write a postcard to two patients each day. These notes might congratulate a patient on an accomplishment, encourage better compliance, or wish him or her good luck on an upcoming event. Whatever the topic, these notes help the patient feel special and create a bond between the patient and staff. That’s the wow factor!

In this day of instant electronic communication, sending a handwritten personal note makes a big impact. It shows patients that they are cared about and that you have taken time out of your busy day to offer them your support. This is considered exceptional customer service!

Customer service extends to the atmosphere you create in your office. It’s easy to forget we are treating people, and not just teeth. When a patient is in the chair, he or she is the most important person at that moment and should never be left alone for more than a few seconds. Patients especially shouldn’t be left alone so that employees can chat about personal matters or plans. These conversations should never be within earshot of a patient.

Conversations should always include the patient. When team members and doctors take an active interest in the patient, it shows how personable the office is, and the patient’s bond with the practice becomes stronger. A strong bond then generates more patient referrals. The greatest compliment an orthodontist can receive is a referral.

So ask yourself, what makes your practice stand out? Standout practices feature exceptional customer service, efficient systems and scheduling, a supportive staff, effective communication, and a warm environment. They also include a state-of-the-art mindset with an up-to-date office environment, equipment and procedures. Creating a standout practice will increase new patient starts, which in turn equals increased revenue.

How do you communicate with patients in your practice?
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Author Bio

A practice consultant for OrthoSynetics, Brenda Cooper has more than 28 years of experience in the dental industry. Cooper started as an orthodontic assistant and quickly learned all aspects of orthodontic operations, moving up to treatment coordinator, recall coordinator, and front office administrator.

Cooper then served as financial coordinator of a private practice that was one of the first to implement 100-percent automatic in-house patient financing. Seeking a greater challenge, and having an interest in areas outside of the private practice, Cooper now shares her knowledge with orthodontic and dental practices across the country with OrthoSynetics.