



# The art and science of generating new patients

A series by Paul A. Henny, DDS

## Word-of-mouth referrals

*Asking a satisfied patient to refer others to your practice sounds easy. But for many dentists and team members, it is one of the toughest of tasks. And to make matters worse, those who avoid this proven method of growing a practice are truly squandering many powerful opportunities.*

**I**f this sounds a bit like your practice, don't worry. You are not alone. A recent survey of 2,500 salespeople in the United States and Canada by McCord and Associates showed that more than 90 percent of salespeople are poorly positioned to maintain production because of a downward trend in their ability to generate successful relationship-based referrals. "It was bad before, but it is horrid now," says McCord, who believes that a reasonably robust economy has lulled many salespeople into complacency.

## Generating word-of-mouth referrals

The same issue exists within dentistry. Many practices have survived for years with steady streams of new patients arriving at their doors. A recent survey by John McGill and Associates shows this stream of new patients now looks more like a trickle in many practices. They are advising all of their clients to develop significant marketing plans and budgets to compensate.

But before running out and spending money on external marketing, consider again your ability to catalyze a powerful word-of-mouth referral system. Avrom King spoke about what he called “King’s Law.” It states “Birds of a feather flock together.” The application of this “law” to dentistry demonstrates that discriminating people who are likely to value fine, relationship-driven, comprehensive dental care often function in the same social circles, live in similar areas, and appreciate similar things. These folks are sometimes in contact with one another on a regular basis, but they rarely have conversations regarding whether or not their dental needs are being appropriately addressed. In other words, 95 percent of these dental patients could — but don’t — function like missionaries for their respective practices. Why? Because missionaries are made, not born, and few practices take the time to consciously develop the habits and processes necessary to consistently lead to word-of-mouth referrals.

The first and most critical step is simply to make certain that you are doing an exceptional job for your patients — from their point of view. This means all of the aspects that make up a positive patient experience must consistently happen day in and day out:

- 1 Prompt, courteous interactions (via telephone and in-office)
- 2 On-time appointments
- 3 Developing meaningful, helping relationships
- 4 Individualizing care strategies to best address each person’s desires and expectations
- 5 Comfortable treatment experiences
- 6 Exceptional attention to details
- 7 Appropriate financial transactions

L.D. Pankey addressed this issue another way. He said, “Know yourself” — through self-discovery; “Know your patient” — through relationship development, comprehensive examinations, and co-discovery; “Know your work” — both technically and behaviorally — through organized and disciplined skill development; and “Apply your knowledge” — through careful preplanning and measured execution. Always weave through your conversations with patients an expression of the purpose of the care you are providing and acknowledgement of the patient’s expressed beliefs and values.

Applying yourself in all of these areas earns you the right to receive referrals. But, when is it appropriate for you to ask for referrals? Well, practices that follow Dr. Pankey’s sage advice also find that they are routinely complemented

L.D. Pankey addressed this issue another way.

He said:

- ▲ **“Know yourself”** — through self-discovery
- ▲ **“Know your patient”** — through relationship development, comprehensive examinations, and co-discovery
- ▲ **“Know your work”** — both technically and behaviorally — through organized and disciplined skill development
- ▲ **“Apply your knowledge”** — through careful preplanning and measured execution. Always weave through your conversations with patients an expression of the purpose of the care you are providing and acknowledgement of the patient’s expressed beliefs and values.

for being kind, gentle, understanding, thorough, and highly competent. And this, my friends, is the fertile moment when you should request a referral.

If you are not routinely receiving positive feedback from your patients — and this includes them routinely paying your fee with gratitude — then it is wise to step back and obtain a more objective view of how your patients perceive and feel about their experiences with your practice. This can be done in several different ways. Patient satisfaction surveys and focus groups can be good starting points. From there, adjustments can be made in a strategic and organized fashion.

Patients who verbalize their happiness and satisfaction should be handed a properly designed practice brochure (printed and/or on a DVD) and reminded to let their friends and acquaintances know about your practice. Do they know that you are still accepting new patients? Surveys show that many patients assume you are not — just like their overcrowded physicians’ practices. Are they aware of anyone who would appreciate the practice’s unique philosophy and capabilities as much as they do? Also, make your patients aware that all initial preconsultation visits are provided at no fee. This sets up a “no financial risk scenario” for patients to safely learn more about you and how your services might benefit them.

Existing patients, as well as prospective patients referred by them, should be directed to your practice Web site. In today’s highly Internet-oriented culture, your Web site needs to function as an on-line brochure. Your Web site should be current, esthetically pleasing to the eye, and deeply informational. Properly displayed “before” and “after” photographs should be plentiful, as optimally photographed casework will go a long way in demonstrating your competency. A section of your Web site should also be dedicated to explaining the uniqueness in your philosophy

## Generating word-of-mouth referrals

toward patient care and how this approach can greatly benefit patients. In other words, your Web site should clearly demonstrate that your practice is exceptional in its ability to not only meet, but exceed the needs and desires of those it serves.

Your ability to be perceived as exceptional also applies to how well you manage your patients emotionally. Thus the saying, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” is directly applicable to your ability to not only please your patients, but also to create missionaries. One of the most effective ways to apply this philosophy is to make it a policy to call all patients who have undergone significant procedures. You can define “significant” for yourself, but we minimally recommend calling all patients who have received anesthesia, a new restoration, or periodontal services. Patients are consistently surprised and impressed that a doctor or team member takes the time to make these caring, follow-up calls.

Patients who become missionaries for your practice should be thanked appropriately, as they have voluntarily assumed the role of part-time PR persons for your practice. Appropriate acknowledgement can range from handwritten “Thank-you” notes to movie tickets or gift certificates to their favorite restaurants.

With this system in place, confidence may be the only remaining hurdle in the way of making this new strategy a fully functioning habit. If you are confident that your practice is able to provide the best of care for its patients, then it should be natural and easy for you to comfortably tell others so. But, if a team member has never experienced treatment in the practice (or worse yet, had a negative experience), then these issues obviously need to be addressed. The bottom line is that everyone needs to be enthusiastically and “from the heart” on board with this critical practice-growth-promoting process.

If you have provided extensive restorative and/or esthetic care for a patient, consider converting your follow-up appointment into what The Pankey Institute calls

a “post-treatment conference.” I prefer to think of these as “celebrations.” At that time, we recommend giving the patient a nicely designed collage of “before” and “after” photographs on which all of the care team members sign their names. This simple step allows the patient to both accurately recall where you started, as well as experience how much you have accomplished together. Heartfelt thanks and best wishes should be conveyed along with the giving of a “graduation” gift. A gift certificate to a local upscale day spa has worked well for us. And finally, give hugs all around!

Consistently crafting helpful working relationships with your patients enables you to routinely generate word-of-mouth referrals. In a mature restorative practice (one which is already thought by clients to be an optimal resource for fine esthetic/restorative care), this process can easily provide as much as 50 percent of the new-patient traffic.

In practices relatively new at providing comprehensive esthetic/restorative services, the word-of-mouth referral rate is often lower than 50 percent. This means that the other 50 (or more) percent will have to originate from elsewhere. In most cases, these additional new patients should arrive via professional referrals and/or a targeted marketing campaign. Future articles will discuss how to enhance professional referrals, how to conduct targeted marketing campaigns, and what to do with patients when they first arrive. **DE**

---

*Dr. Paul A. Henny practices esthetic and restorative dentistry in Roanoke, Va. He is a consulting visiting faculty member of The Pankey Institute and the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry, and is a founding partner and senior consultant for Mark 4 Associates, a dental practice-consulting firm, specializing in marketing and practice brand development. He may be reached by calling (540) 314-6657 or by e-mail at [paul@paulhennydds.com](mailto:paul@paulhennydds.com).*

