

# HOW TO CREATE MORE REFERRALS IN DENTISTRY



***“To ask a patient for a referral, first you have to establish trust. Therefore, by being a dentist, you are actually in the business of establishing trust.”***

The best way to grow your business is to start asking yourself better questions.

By framing the problem as a question (and not as a statement, where most people go wrong), you can get different perspectives - which will help you create different solutions and outcomes.

### **MANDATORY QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU START**

Before you start asking for referrals in a structured way, you need to define clear answers with your team to a few initial important questions.

If you start without having clear answers, chances are you will get lost on the way or it will take you much longer to get where you want with referrals.

It's better to set some time aside and get clarity on the following questions. Remember - clarity is power!

Here is the list of few mandatory questions:

“What do we need to change, if we want to grow our dental business by referral only?”

“What has to happen on a daily basis in our dental clinic, so that our patients are willing to give us their recommendation?”

“What shouldn't happen on a daily basis in our dental clinic, as it will prevent the patient from recommending us to others?”

“What level of our service will motivate our patients to say: I would have to be crazy to look for another dentist!”

“What are the biggest obstacles in the way we provide the service to our patients right now in our clinic?”

“What were the most common complaints and objections we have received from our patients in the past?”

“What risk do our patients see in recommending us to their friends and family?”

“What don’t we see right now, that is inhibiting us from getting referrals?”  
Words of caution - if you are smart, you will sit down with those same questions on a regular basis, because there is a big chance that the answers to those same questions will change with time.

And that means you will have to change your referral process as well.

### **WHEN SHOULD YOU ASK FOR A REFERRAL**

As we know, in many countries it is not allowed for dentists to advertise - so, this question of growing your patient’s base is even more relevant in dentistry.

Many dentists are asking their patients for the referral, but most of them do it only at the very end of the treatment.

During the preparations for our business experience event “D Business Leadership Summit” last year, I have asked one of our speakers dr. Cyril Gaillard, one of the top dentists and a business coach, when is he asking his patients for a referral.

And his answer was mind blowing: “In my clinic we are looking for every possibility to ask a satisfied patient for a referral - and we do it in every single visit! If we provide them with a high-end professional dental service, it is our obligation and right to ask for a recommendation.”

For successful dental clinics it is mandatory to create different ways, situations and questions, to ask the patients for a referral during every visit. Of course, this is not always possible, but as you will see, if you prepare yourself and your team, chances are high that you will be able to do it in almost every visit to your clinic.

But please check before you start - high and above standard dental service is mandatory for this process of getting new referrals to work.

## **THE BUSINESS OF CREATING TRUST**

The foundation of the process of getting referrals is finding the right way to communicate to your patients.

And for us to be able get our message across, we need to create trust with our patients first. Without you and your team creating trust with your patients first, they will rightfully have a feeling that you are trying to sell them on something.

One of the best ways to establish trust is to create empathy. In communication it means to create the feeling with our patients that we fully understand them - and the best way to do that is to ask them the right kind of questions.

Even though there is a myth that with every “Yes” we get from our patients, will get us closer to our goal, in reality it doesn’t work well.

By asking them to get a “Yes”, we will come across as “pushy” or “salesy” - and nobody likes to be pushed around.

It is in our human nature that we will fight for the autonomy to make the decision - and by pushing people too much in the direction of “Yes”, people will feel that we are trying to take this autonomy away from them and make the decision for them.

There is a better way - we can create empathy with few simple communication rules to follow. Let’s share a few examples.

## **LABEL THE EMOTION THAT YOU SEE ON THE PATIENT**

By labeling the emotion that our patient is displaying, we start to establish trust.

Say something like:

“It seems that you feel stressed out ...” or

“It looks like you are having second thoughts ...” or

“It sounds like you are satisfied with the outcome of the treatment ...”

When we label the emotion we are projecting the sense of understanding the other side.

Don't be afraid if we make the wrong label - no harm done! The patient will correct you and you can take it from there.

We have to use labeling especially when we notice a negative emotion on a patient - because by labeling the emotion verbally we will inoculate it's negative effect on the patient.

“It seems like you are having doubts about the treatment...” will get the patient to open up and discuss potential obstacles to opt in for the treatment.

Word of warning - when you make the label, you have to be silent for a few seconds for the label to work. If you make the label and just continue to talk after it, the effect will be minimal.

## **ADDRESS THE OBJECTIONS FIRST**

By addressing the objections upfront, you will express your certainty in the treatment and decrease the negative effect of the potential objection from the patient.

People love and appreciate when you communicate directly as it also means honesty and authenticity - so don't be afraid to open your conversation with the patient by going through a couple of potential objections the patient could have.

"It may seem to you that we are going only after your pocket, with the total amount you need to invest in this full mouth rehabilitation..."

"Maybe we look just like another dental office to you ..."

"You may be concerned about the length of the whole treatment plan ..."

To prepare for this communication skill, you need to list the potential objections your patients could have and turn them into direct and honest sentences, like in the example above.

You will be surprised by the positive reaction from your patients.

## **GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO SAY NO**

If your patient is aware that they can “veto” any step of the process, it will give them the feeling of security, safety and ability to make the final decision by themselves.

In order to create this safety space for your patient, you have to include this from the very beginning of the conversation.

“If you feel uncomfortable with any part of our initial treatment plan proposal, feel free to stop us and say no.”

“If you disagree with any part of our proposal, please stop me and express your point of view freely.

“If you don’t feel certain about any details of the treatment plan, please stop me and we will go through it again - as long as it takes you to be fully onboard with our proposal.

“Please stop me at any point of this conversation if you don’t feel comfortable.”

“Feel free to stop me and say no to any part of our initial treatment plan, if it doesn’t make sense from your point of view.”

Once patients feel comfortable to stop us and say no, they will give us much more of their trust as they will know we are not trying to sell them on anything.

## **ASK THEM A “NO” ORIENTED QUESTION**

By asking “No” oriented questions, we are projecting the feeling of safety to our patients, as explained earlier.

To ask a “No” oriented question, you simply need to take a “Yes” oriented question and turn it around.

For example, you want to initially ask: “Can I ask for your recommendation?”

Turn it around: “Am I asking too much, if I ask you to recommend us to your friends?”

Or you may ask: “Is now the wrong time to ask for your recommendation?”

Or it could be: “Am I being out of line, to ask you to refer us to your friends and family?”

## **SEEDING THE “REFERRALS ONLY” BUSINESS MODEL**

As the saying goes: “You will reap what you sow!”

You and your staff have to sow the concept of your business working through referrals only, at all times!

When you casually speak about the patient who has just finished his appointment, you can say: “He was referred by one of our patients.”

There are numerous phrases that can be used by you and your staff to “plant” this idea of “referrals only” business.

It has to be by design and you will have to train your staff to do it, but in only few months your patients will start to understand how referrals are the foundation of your dental clinic - and if you treat the well with honest and authenticity, they will be more than willing to step up and recommend you to others.



## **MEASURE AND REPORT**

All of the above will stay just a few nice words on the paper if you don't measure and report on the referrals regularly.

You need to define the actions that lead to getting referrals (we call those "critical drivers") and KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) - the outcomes you want to achieve.

And you need to measure more in the beginning.

Let's say that you set up a goal of getting one new referral every week - this will bring 52 new potential patients to your clinic.

Now, what has to happen for your team to get that referral? What actions can you take in a structured way? What communication training do you and your team need to get the message across? How often should you meet and train? How often should you measure? What should you measure?

Those are just free of the questions you will need to work with your team.

Good luck!