



By Richard D. Czerniawski

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT VERSUS CARING FOR CUSTOMERS

Practice management is about building a health care practitioner's business or in industry parlance "practice." It's concerned with growing sales and profits. While not mutually exclusive with providing care for customers, the latter objective can be compromised. This issue was brought home to me recently when my wife related her experience with dealing with the practice of a new dentist for us.

My wife made an appointment for teeth cleaning. When she arrived at the dentist's office, she was asked to fill in a form about herself. One of the questions was for her social security number. Why would the dentist need her social security number, and who in his/her right mind would provide it? My wife refused to provide it, and the assistant took her driver's license number instead.

After my wife completed the questionnaire, the assistant asked her to take a seat and wait to be called to see the dentist. My wife stated that she had made a reservation for cleaning, not an exam by the dentist. The assistant told her that the dentist needed to see her so he could determine what type of cleaning she needed. "Type" of cleaning? The assistant also said to my wife that she had to make a separate appointment for the cleaning. I'll share that my wife was not pleased to learn that it would take two meetings to receive one cleaning.

After some discussion, the assistant told my wife she could have an appointment for teeth cleaning later in the day—to which my wife begrudgingly agreed. Again the assistant invited my wife to take a seat and wait to be called for X-rays of her entire mouth. A complete set of X-rays? My wife protested that she had a full set of X-rays taken in Chicago merely 6-months earlier. The assistant informed my wife that she could not see the dentist until she had the X-rays. At this point, my wife took back the application and left the office. She will not return. Nor will I use this dentist.

X-rays, visit with the dentist, and separate appointment for a cleaning. Cha-Ching! Perhaps, the dentist might argue that this is best practice for quality dental care. Possibly, s/he might be right. Probably, the assistant could have done a better job explaining the process when my wife called in to make an appointment for teeth cleaning. However, I can't help but believe it has more to do with growing revenues, even if it comes at the expense of the patient. Cha-Ching!

I related my wife's story to my business partner over breakfast. He got angry and described a similar practice management story of his own. When he moved into his new city, he made a dental

appointment. The dentist examined his teeth and told him that he had a lot of old fillings, which he declared: "must be replaced." Moreover, he recommended that they be filled with gold. Gold?!? My partner left that dentist never to return. We both concluded that the dentist wanted to line his pockets with gold, not merely fill teeth with it.

Look, I have no problem with increasing sales and earning a fair profit. I fully support it. Money flows to those that fulfill relevant, meaningful needs—whatever they might be for each individual—that are valued by the recipient. It's the way of markets and its the way it should be. We reward those that provide value with (increasing) sales and profits. Hallelujah!

But in the cases I shared regarding practice management, it appears to be "me-centric" versus "customer-centric." It seems to be about dollars and cents as opposed to addressing the patient's health care needs and expectations.

I've always subscribed to the principle that if we take care of our customers—better serve them than our competition—the sales will follow. My business partner and I have never shunned from doing more work for a customer than proposed—all while honoring the original fee—when and where warranted to get the job done and done right.

Customers are people. Care for and treat people right, and they will stick with you. This maxim is universal, applying to all sectors. Perhaps, it's the best practice management practice of all.

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