

Customer Loyalty and First Impressions

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A first impression can be established in as little as 7 seconds. A positive first impression provides the basis for building a strong brand for your dermatology practice. If a patient's first impression of your dermatology practice and staff is negative, it may prevent him/her from visiting your practice and ultimately keep him/her from becoming a loyal, long-term patient.

When practitioners design strategies to attract and garner the benefits of loyal patients (patients who keep and rebook appointments; purchase retail products; and refer family, friends, and coworkers to the practice), they often focus on consistently meeting expectations in repeated interactions with patients over time; however, you may be surprised to learn that it is just one interaction—the first one—that may be the determining factor for establishing long-term patient loyalty.

In March 2012, ClickFox¹ conducted a brand loyalty survey to examine the motives behind customer loyalty, the brands that consumers are most loyal to, and the effects of customer loyalty on those brands. The majority of consumer respondents indicated that their first impression was the most critical time to develop loyalty to a brand. Loyalty also was gained from exceeding expectations in resolving an issue and the reputation of the company (ie, word of mouth).¹

These findings indicate the importance of a positive first impression for patients. As the practitioner, you need to be

aware that a first impression is developed not only at a patient's first appointment but also during other patient touchpoints before they enter your office. He/she may begin to form an opinion about your brand based on the following elements: (1) marketing and sales collateral; (2) your Web site, blog, and social media networks; (3) your telephone greeting, after-hours greeting, and appointment prescreening questions; (4) the ease with which an appointment can be booked online or by telephone; and (5) how easy it is to obtain directions to your facility and whether they are adequate and correct.

Once a patient decides to visit your practice, he/she will continue to build on his/her first impression of your practice and your brand based on the following components: (1) the outside of your building, your parking area, and accessibility to your building or office; (2) how patients are greeted when they arrive and the check-in process; (3) the décor and comfort level of your waiting area; (4) the wait time and how important the patient feels while waiting (does your staff let him/her know how long a wait will be, apologize for delays, or provide a hospitality station?); (5) the appearance and dress of your staff; and (6) the overall décor, ambiance, and feel of your practice, including your restrooms and treatment areas.

It is likely that there are many small details in your practice that are within your control or influence as a practitioner but are currently being overlooked. Because first impressions are key, it is important to take time to look at your practice through the eyes of a new or prospective patient and create an experience for your patients that ultimately builds the foundation for long-term customer loyalty.

Reference

1. 2012 brand loyalty survey. ClickFox Web site. <http://web.clickfox.com/2012SurveyResults-BrandLoyalty.html>. Accessed April 15, 2012.

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