

How to create a welcoming, professional environment for your patients that they'll talk about on social media

You may think your patients form their impression of you when they meet you for the first time in your office. You know how to present yourself professionally, how to listen, how to tailor a surgical plan to a patient's specific needs. But what about the other things patients experience when they choose to visit your practice? The truth is they start forming an impression of you long before they even meet you, which begins most likely through your marketing – your website and the ads you ran to get them to call your practice in the first place. Now that your patient's have overcome the first set of hurdles and have not only called your practice for a consult, but have also shown up – now it's time to really impress them as they're sitting in your reception area, waiting patiently to see you.

Your staff are the first people your new patient will interact with. In the patient's eyes, your staff represent *you*. Encourage your staff to devote time to each patient, no matter how much other work there is to do. People may be quicker to take offense or to notice flaws when they're nervous about having a procedure, so it's important to make each patient feel calm and welcome. Have your team greet them warmly by name, and ask how they're doing; a simple friendly gesture is sometimes all it takes to put a nervous patient at ease.

This calm sense of welcome should extend to your waiting area as well. It goes without saying that it should be clean and tidy, but don't take this too far; no one likes a bare, "clinical" setting. On the other hand, you don't want too many different colors or patterns or decorations that overwhelm the eye and create a feeling of chaos. There's plenty of room for differences aesthetic tastes among cultures, and even individuals, but the overall look should be simple, yet elegant, warm and comforting.

It's always polite to offer patients some kind of refreshment, such as water or tea, or to keep a small dish of sweets on a table in the reception area. Avoid messy foods or drinks that may stain furniture and carpeting, and which will require constant cleaning. Provide a variety of interesting reading material that includes the latest magazine issues, but also be sure to include copies of your marketing material, any books you have written as well as any videos that you have made about the various procedures to keep patients focused about the reason they're there. Most importantly, designate someone to check on and tidy up the reception area a regular intervals – or more frequently during busy periods.

But even the calmest, most comfortable patient doesn't like to wait too long; try not to leave them in the reception area for more than a few minutes. One ISAPS plastic surgeon we know of only keeps six chairs in his reception area, which forces him and his staff to stay on schedule, since there's no room for more patients to wait. If there is a long wait (and it happens), a member of your team should escort the patient to an examination room to wait there. This room should also contain at least one "welcoming" focal point, and/or be decorated in a warm color. If you often examine patients lying on their backs, consider placing a decoration or piece of artwork fastened firmly on the ceiling.

What happens on the telephone and in your reception area can improve – or deter – the quality of communication you have with your patients. People who feel uncomfortable are far less likely to book a procedure with you. Remember it's all about winning a patient's trust, and giving a patient a warm, welcoming experience where their time is valued as much as yours will certainly get them talking about it on social media to their friends!