

# EFDA or Not: How to be THE BEST Dental Assistant

By Karen Burnett, RDH, MA  
Consultant, Practice Leadership Burkhart Consulting

**Y**ou have mastered chair-side assisting. You believe in your doctor's clinical philosophy and ability. What three things can increase your value as an appreciated team member, patient-advocate and employee and prevent "auto-pilot" assisting?

## 1. Communicate effectively

We influence our personal and professional lives when we become aware of how we communicate. Learn to decrease stress and turnover within your team and your patients by evaluating behavioral styles and responding appropriately. Take the time to assess whether a person is more task-oriented or more relational or more cautious/indirect or more direct in his or her communications. We learn that some people need details, while others only want the outcome; some people value control, while others value flexibility. We also communicate more effectively when we learn what we need to make decisions, how we respond to stress, and what outcomes are important to us.

How can what you say and how you say it make a difference in patients' dental experiences? How can you build patient confidence in the practice before treatment is ever started? Assess what is important to the patient by asking how you can help make his or her visit most comfortable. Your voice should convey warmth and confidence and focus on the patient. Your non-verbal message is even more important. Your appearance should be consistent with the style of your practice (relaxed, family or

formal, boutique). Your eye contact and smile should reflect friendly, professional patient care. The most effective way to communicate with a patient in a clinical setting is with the patient seated upright at your level. This literally puts the patient in a better position to ask questions and participate in his or her treatment. Increasing the patient's level of trust in the practice also increases his or her commitment to the recommended treatment.

## 2. Participate in treatment presentation

The bond that develops with patients during dental procedures promotes confidence both in us and the practice. As advocates for our patients, we can gather information to assist Doctor making the most comprehensive and appropriate treatment recommendations. A looming plan for retirement and travel could indicate treatment now rather than later. A patient's busy schedule may not allow for spontaneous dental emergencies.

Being skilled and competent in technology builds your professionalism, efficiently maximizes Doctor's time and ultimately improves patient care through treatment plan support. There are several ways that you can accomplish this. Increase acceptance of treatment and convey clinical details to a dental lab or insurance company by use of the intra-oral camera. Provide comprehensive patient care through technology such as Velscope to perform initial oral cancer screenings. Build the "before and after" album for the

practice with digital photography, which increases case acceptance by illustrating the possibilities of dental treatment through Doctor's clinical expertise.

## 3. Build the practice through referrals

You are proud of the treatment your Doctor and your team provide and you've developed rapport with patients during their appointments. Compliment patients you enjoy by inviting their friends, family, and co-workers to join the practice. By growing the practice with more great patients, you influence your future patient days. Use patient compliments about the practice or their smile as an opportunity to ask them to refer someone like themselves to the practice. Those patients who can't stop smiling or showing others their smile most often talk about your practice while in the practice and out of the practice.

How do you ask for a referral in a way that is both sincere and confident? Verbal and non-verbal communications should reflect your style and that of the practice. You can start with a sincere greeting: "We always look forward to our day when we see your name on our schedule. We'd be happy to see anyone who is a friend of yours." Tell your patients how the practice thanks patients for their referrals. A tangible item such as a gift certificate or practice logo water bottle promotes their discussion of the practice.

The personal and professional benefits to expanding your dental assistant role are great. When you develop your role within the vision of the practice, you increase your worth as a dental assistant and your value to the practice. You can be the best dental assistant by developing your communication, technical and marketing skills. ■