One of the biggest fallacies in dentistry is the idea that your practice will grow if you focus on increasing the flow of new patients. Although attracting new patients is important, if you put time and energy into your existing patient relationships, amazing things will happen. It’s been estimated that the average practice has about one million dollars of diagnosed but undone dentistry sitting in their charts. This is a colossal missed opportunity that can be realized when you focus on turning your patients into raving fans.

So, what is a raving fan? They are patients who never miss an appointment, show up on time, pay their fees with appreciation, are open and grateful for your treatment suggestions, refer friends and family, and write really nice things about you on the internet. To create raving fans you have to take patients’ expectations of what their dental visit is going to be and turn it upside down. Take everything negative they expect to experience and turn it into a positive.

Dr. Irvin Becker, who was chairman of Education at Pankey Institute, once said the reason most people never received optimal care is because no one ever asked them if they wanted it. So put away your fears of rejection and failure and let’s look at the patient experience through a different paradigm of delivering healthcare in an abundant and relationship-driven way.

**The New Patient Experience**

The foundation of raving fan relationships begins with the new patient visit, which begins with the initial phone call. When a new patient calls, let them know you are delighted they have chosen your practice and find out where they heard about you – how they were “pre-heated” – and make note of it in their file. That same day, send them a personal welcome package on nice stationary that includes a professional brochure about your practice. Reiterate how excited you are that they have chosen your practice for their oral healthcare needs. When they come into the practice, personally greet them by name and escort them into a consultation room – on time. Being timely is important because most patients expect to wait.
Your initial meeting is all about asking questions and listening. To create raving fans you must out-listen the competition. Here are a few questions to ask:

“Did you have any trouble finding the practice?”
This will tell you if they are new to the area.

“Who can we thank for referring you?”
Confirms how they found out about your practice and communicates that your primary source of new patients is from happy existing patients, which builds trust.

“What is your concern with your oral health/teeth?”
Gives the patient the opportunity to explain why they made the appointment.

“Why did you leave your last dentist?”
Gives insight into their previous dental experiences and, most probably, fears and barriers to care.

“Do you know of any current dental needs you have – a crown, cavity, etc.?”
Lets you know if they have delayed or declined care in the past, which may indicate the level of value they see in dentistry.

“Do I have your permission to discuss any issues or changes I see in your mouth other than the ones you’ve told me you are concerned with?”
Ensures you have permission to do a comprehensive evaluation and share the results with the patient.

“How healthy do you want to be? What are your goals – to fix what’s hurting or wrong now or to have your teeth for life?”
Provides insight into their commitment level for care.

These are just a few of the questions to ask. It takes reserving key time, but the impact it has on the relationship, the patient and the practice is huge.

**The Evaluation and Treatment Conversation**

The next step is to do a gentle, but thorough comprehensive evaluation using the best technology to make the patient as comfortable as possible. For example, use Digital Doc intra-oral...
cameras for the initial evaluation and “before, during and after” shots of every procedure, every time. Do an oral cancer screening using VELscope®, checking for decay with digital radiography. After the evaluation is complete, thank them for their time and set an appointment for a second visit where you will share the results and doctor’s recommendations. That night, send them a beautiful card signed by the entire team.

At the second visit, have a written consultation and give the patient a digital case presentation that shows all the digital photos you took and enhancements that are possible. Put a color photo in front of the patient that’s been enlarged 40X, look at it together so you can both see the issue, maybe a crack in a tooth, then simply ask, “How can I help?” This delivery of care is not authoritarian, it is not punitive and it is not guilt based. It is merely working together to the benefit of the patient in a way they can control and be comfortable with. It’s during this point in the conversation that financial arrangements are discussed. Never try to guess who can or cannot afford care. Instead, let patients know you have several payment options for them to choose from:

“Mrs. Smith, we have three ways to save you money on your dental needs. Let me know which one works best for you. First, if you pay at or before the time of treatment by check or cash, you will receive a 5% bookkeeping courtesy. Or you can use your credit card. Or the third option, you can use CareCredit’s healthcare credit card, which offers a variety of promotional financing offers. Which would you like to hear more about?”

This system of presenting payment options is predictable, planned and choreographed, and works beautifully.

After treatment you can continue to delight and surprise patients by exceeding expectations. If they didn’t eat before the appointment, have someone run and get them their favorite smoothie. And later that evening, give them a call. I simply say, “Hi, it’s Mark Hyman. I just wanted to see how you are feeling after our work today. Are you feeling okay? Do you have any questions or concerns for me at this point?”

The idea is so simple. Take all negative expectations and create an experience your patients have never had before. Use humor, if you feel comfortable with it, to put patients at ease and a smile on their faces. This generates raving fans. You will
enjoy dentistry more. So will your team. And, amazingly, so will your patients.

BIO:
Dr. Mark E. Hyman’s dynamic approach to practice enhancement, team building, and relationship dentistry has propelled his 21 year-old practice to among the top one percent in the nation. A nationally-recognized and highly regarded speaker, Dr. Hyman is an active faculty member at The Pankey Institute for Advanced Education in Key Biscayne, Florida, and an adjunct associate professor at the University of North Carolina School of Dentistry. Voted one of the “TOP CLINICIANS IN CE” by Dentistry Today magazine, Dr. Hyman was named Young Dentist of the Year by the North Carolina Dental Society in 1995.