

Mastering Patient Communication in Podiatry

Use these strategies to improve satisfaction and build trust.

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Introduction: Communication Is Clinical Care

Clear, thoughtful communication is one of the most powerful tools in a podiatry practice. It is a clinical tool that affects outcomes, drives patient satis-

rious concerns that, if not managed and addressed quickly, could escalate to a formal complaint with the state podiatric board. The good news is that small, consistent improvements at every level of the practice can make

team member brings their values to the job, but without clearly defined practice values, everyone may follow their values instead of what the practice values. For instance, you might prioritize excellence, but if your team believes patient volume matters more than the quality of the patient experience, they may begin cutting corners. The team will follow the lead once they understand the practice's values and the physician(s) and manager "walk the walk" of those values. Some examples of commonly embraced practice values are:

- 1) Excellence
- 2) Integrity
- 3) Safety
- 4) Respect
- 5) Kindness
- 6) Service

Using excellence as an example, when a practice consistently com-

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faction, and directly impacts the practice's growth and reputation. Communication can build trust or create confusion at the front desk, in the exam room, or through digital platforms.

When communication fails, it often leads to misunderstandings, negative reviews, or patients not following through on their treatment plan. These situations can lead to more se-

a measurable difference. This article outlines practical, real-world strategies for staff and physicians to create a stronger, more patient-centered communication culture.

Let Your Values Lead Your Practice

Every practice operates within a culture shaped by values, whether they're intentional or not. Each

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municates with patients clearly and professionally, it demonstrates that excellence is a core value. Once you define and share your practice values with the team, those values can become part of every patient interaction. Think of it as creating a shared mindset—"this is how we do things here"—that guides how your team works together and serves patients.

Establishing a formal set of practice values requires thoughtful consideration and an upfront time investment. Communicating the core values to the team is essential, but incorporating them into every part of the practice operations is vital. Practices that truly understand their "identity" and intentionally weave their values into their day-to-day work will result in a cohesive team.

Coaching From Your Values

Incorporating values into staff coaching is a powerful way to ensure accountability within your practice. When the team understands that their actions are measured against core values such as empathy, integrity, and excellence, they are more likely to take ownership of their roles. This approach shifts accountability from a top-down directive to a shared commitment that everyone can rally around. Physicians who lead by example through their tone, phrasing, and response to feedback create a team culture that prioritizes the patient experience.

To effectively coach from your values, start by clearly defining and communicating those values to your team. During coaching sessions, use specific examples of how adhering to these values can improve patient interactions and overall satisfaction. For instance, if a patient had a challenging experience, discuss how an empathetic approach could have altered the outcome.

Imagine a front desk staff member using their cell phone during the check-in process, which can lead to a poor patient experience. If one of the practice's core values is service, the physician or manager can use that as a foundation for coaching.

In a private and supportive con-

versation, the manager can explain how being fully present and attentive at the front desk sets the tone for the patient's entire visit. They can highlight how using a cell phone during check-in might make patients feel unimportant or ignored, which contradicts the practice's commitment to service.

The manager can then work with the staff member to find solutions, such as setting designated times for phone use away from the front desk. By framing the conversation around the shared value of service, the manager fosters accountability in a way that feels constructive and aligned with the practice's mission.

Recognizing and reinforcing positive behavior is crucial because it encourages staff to repeat those ac-

describe the reason for the visit. Assuring words builds trust and helps solidify a strong connection between the patient and the clinical team. The physician's communication style can reinforce or erode that trust during the consultation. Clear explanations, patient-friendly language, and inviting dialogue help patients feel safe, informed, and confident in their care plan.

Practices that consistently educate staff and physicians to deliver a consistent message and tone throughout every step of the visit tend to see fewer misunderstandings and better overall patient satisfaction.

Imagine patients receiving the same experience as someone making a reservation or checking into a 5-star luxury resort. This level of service is

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tions and helps cultivate a culture of excellence and attentiveness. When team members see that their efforts are appreciated and align with the practice's core values, they're more likely to maintain those standards and contribute to an environment where every patient interaction reflects the practice's commitment to quality care.

The Front Desk Staff Set the Tone

The patient's first interaction with a podiatry office happens before they sit in the treatment chair and meet the physician. A phone call, a website chat, or the first greeting at check-in creates an impression that shapes the entire visit. A warm, professional tone, clear instructions, and respectful conversation signal that the practice values the patient's time and well-being.

Once the patient goes to the back office, the responsibility continues. The medical assistant can help an anxious patient feel more at ease while listening to the patient

achievable in a podiatry clinic setting. The primary distinction between customer service at a medical clinic and that of a luxury resort often lies in the quality of training provided to the individuals answering the phone or managing the front desk.

Training and Consistency Are the Secret

Most front-line staff hired into medical practices have never gone through formal customer service or communication training. Many physicians assume that these people, especially front desk workers, have strong skills in these areas. The fact is that they are bringing the habits and skill set they have learned at previous medical offices. Unless specifically trained in how to treat and serve the patients, they will use their best techniques, which might miss the mark if a practice is trying to grow in volume and improve its reputation.

Excellent communication is not

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a one-time training event. It requires consistent reinforcement, modeling, and team-wide commitment. Practice leaders can hold regular communication refreshers, role-play common scenarios, review patient feedback as a team, and incorporate communication standards into clinical and non-clinical staff onboarding. Adding healthcare-specific customer service and patient communications training and making it as important as HIPAA and OSHA training will help the practice elevate the patient experience and make life easier for the manager.

Simple tools like scripts, cheat sheets, and continuing education can support team development and reduce the pressure on individuals to “wing it,” especially during challenging moments.

Use Active Listening to Strengthen Patient Relationships

It's easy to fall into a rhythm of hearing patients without fully listening. However, it makes a noticeable difference when staff and physicians slow down and practice active listening. This means going beyond the words and paying attention to tone, body language, and what's not being said.

One helpful approach is the teach-back method. After explaining something important, ask the patient to repeat it in their own words, not to quiz them, but to ensure everything is clear. It's also helpful to use language that shows genuine interest, such as:

- 1) *“What I'm hearing you say is...”*
- 2) *“It sounds like this has been bothering you for a while.”*

Simple moments like this show the patient that their concerns matter. They build trust, help prevent miscommunication, and increase the chances that patients will follow through on your recommendations. When patients feel genuinely heard, they're more likely to stick with the practice and feel confident in the care they receive.

Use the THINK Model for Thoughtful Communication

The THINK Model is a simple yet powerful tool that every member of the podiatry team can use while

they pause before speaking, especially during tense or stressful moments. It asks five quick mental questions:

- 1) **T**—Is it True?
- 2) **H**—Is it Helpful?
- 3) **I**—Is it Inspiring?
- 4) **N**—Is it Necessary?
- 5) **K**—Is it Kind?

The THINK model helps avoid reactive, rushed, or dismissive comments when used intentionally. It is beneficial when dealing with anxious,

understanding that may lead to frustration, missed follow-up steps, or billing surprises. Common phrases like “You'll be in and out” or “It should be covered” may seem harmless, but they can unintentionally set unrealistic expectations or imply certainty where none exists.

Use language that acknowledges variables and invites dialogue to promote clarity and protect trust. Phrases such as:

Patients often leave healthcare visits more confused than they or their providers realize.

impatient, or pain-prone patients. Training the entire team, including providers, to use this model creates a culture of professionalism, clarity, and respect in every interaction.

Use the L.A.S.T. Model to Handle Difficult Conversations

At some point, every podiatry office will encounter patient frustration, confusion about costs or delays, or concerns about outcomes. How staff and providers handle these conversations has a lasting impact.

The LAST model offers a simple framework to guide the conversation:

- 1) **L**—Listen fully without interrupting
- 2) **A**—Apologize sincerely, even if the practice didn't cause the issue
- 3) **S**—Solve the issue or offer the next best step
- 4) **T**—Thank the patient for bringing the concern forward

Physicians who model this approach set the tone for the rest of the team. When everyone communicates with empathy and professionalism, even difficult conversations can strengthen the relationship with the patient. What leaves a lasting impression isn't the mistake; it's the effort to make it right.

Phrasing Techniques That Build Clarity

Patients often leave healthcare visits more confused than they or their providers realize. Vague or assumptive language can contribute to this uncertainty, creating gaps in un-

1) *“Based on what we see from your insurance, here's what we expect...”*

2) *“The next step we recommend is X, and here's why...”*

3) *“It looks like your deductible has not been met, so we'll verify and confirm before your next visit.”*

4) *“It sounds like you've had this issue before, so let's talk about what worked and what didn't.”*

These small shifts in phrasing provide space for nuance and demonstrate thoughtfulness. They also help patients feel seen and heard rather than brushed off or rushed through the system.

Whether the front office is quoting a fee, a medical assistant is explaining a pre-op instruction, or the physician is discussing diagnosis and treatment options, carefully choosing words can make all the difference. Intentional communication reduces patient anxiety, strengthens the relationship, and improves the likelihood that patients will comply with care recommendations.

Use the Teach-Back Method Without Talking Down

The Teach-Back Method is a valuable way to confirm that patients understand their diagnosis, treatment plan, or next steps. However, this method must be used with care. When phrased poorly, it can come across as condescending. Instead of asking, “Do you understand?” or “Tell me what I just said,” try:

- 1) *“We covered a lot today. To*

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make sure I explained it clearly, can you walk me through how you will manage this dressing at home?"

2) "What will you do if your cast gets wet?"

This method allows patients to

podiatry office offers multiple HIPAA-compliant communication options, it makes things easier for the patient and reduces call volume and follow-up errors for the team.

Both staff and physicians should be aware of these preferences and honor them when possible. Digital

staff feel more equipped, and physicians experience fewer misunderstandings and greater loyalty.

The best part is that these changes do not require expensive systems or a complete overhaul. They begin with a service mindset, thoughtful language, and a willingness to train and support the entire team.

Every interaction and conversation, from the front desk to the exam room, is an opportunity to build trust. When trust grows, so does the practice. PM

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process the information, speak in their own words, and ask for clarification without feeling embarrassed or belittled.

Meet Patients Where They Are (Including Digitally)

Every patient has a preferred way to communicate. Some still want a phone call, while others prefer text, email, or secure web chat. When a

tools that support appointment reminders, quick check-ins, and billing questions can make patients feel more connected and cared for without burdening the team.

Conclusion: Strong Communication Strengthens Everything

When communication improves in a podiatry office, everything improves. Patients feel more confident,



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