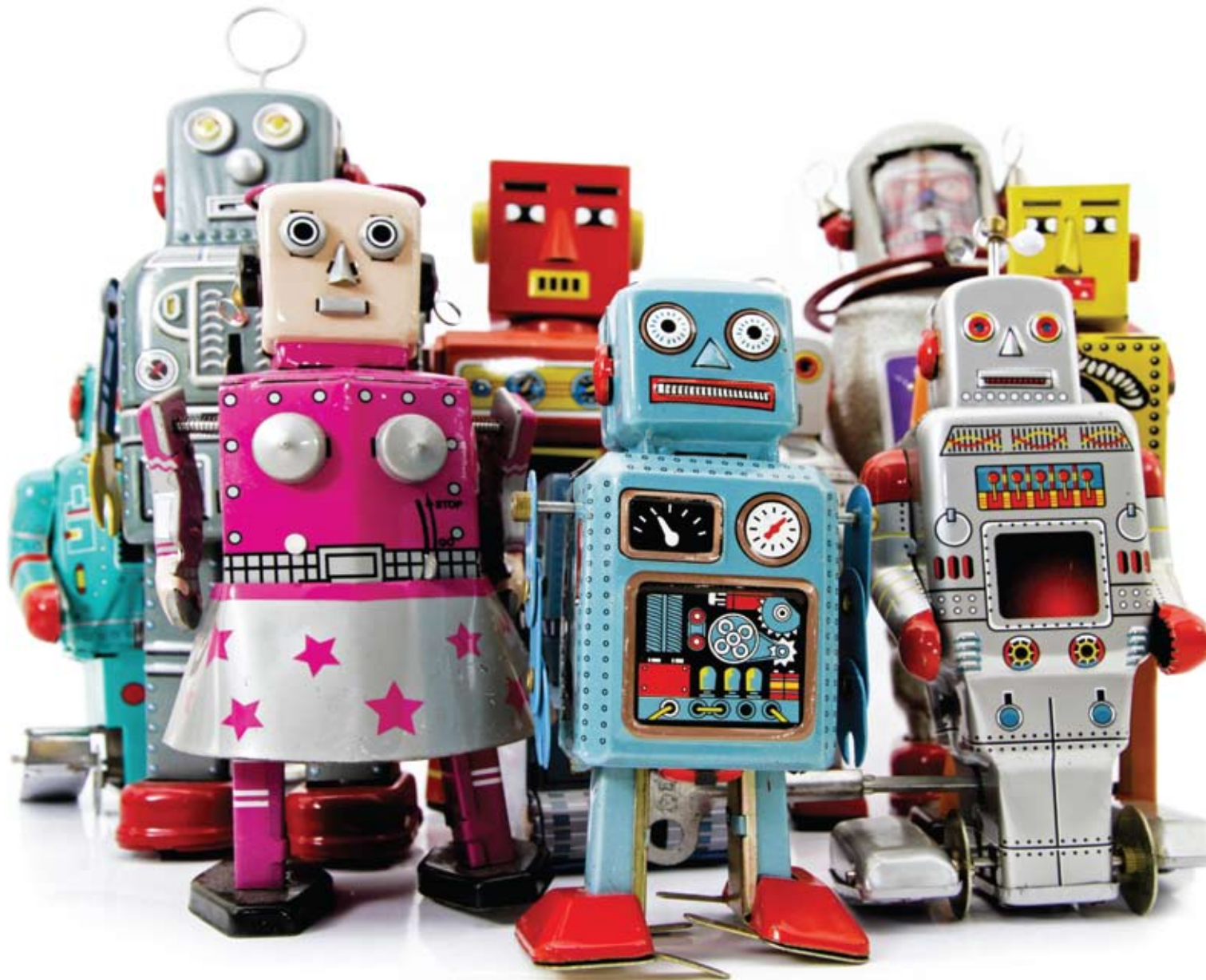


IS YOUR FRONT DESK RUN BY ROBOTS?

By Emma John

'Good morning, thank you for calling ABC Dental Care. My name's Jane, how can I help you?' Quite often I go into practices and the staff have been issued with laminated scripts on how to answer the phone, capture a new patient enquiry or deal with a cancellation at short notice. Which is all well and good, but where's the personality, where's the personal interaction? The best front desks are those where every member of staff knows what to say but is given the freedom to say it in their own voice.



Some practices believe that many of the functions of a front desk can be somehow automated - scripts for every kind of enquiry, set ways to answer the phone, LED displays to call people into their appointment. The question is, can this consistency and automation go too far? Ask yourself, is it tailored for the benefit of the customer or the practice? It's clear that dentistry is becoming more and more a relationship-based industry and the most successful relationships are the ones you invest time into.

Ultimately, people buy people. All the investment in the infrastructure of your practice will count for little if the people on reception are cold, indifferent or unknowledgeable. In many cases, the successful recruitment of new patients and the loyalty of existing patients is down to the interactions that happen on the front desk, sometimes even more so than what happens in the dentist's chair.

One of the key reasons I'm usually asked to work with a practice is they want their front desk operation to stand out from the crowd, increase the level of service offered to their customers and, as a result, to increase their income. My very privileged role is then to assist the team and facilitate and support the required changes. Here are a few of the key principles I try to get practices to think about.

Aligning the job with tangible results

So many practices I deal with give their staff a range of tasks to carry out without telling them what bigger goals they relate to or explaining why they are important and what effect getting them right or wrong will have on the business. Front desk staff have the power to significantly boost sales or alternatively drive them down through poorly handled relationships and missed opportunities.

Make sure that all your front desk staff are well informed as to how their day-to-day activities impact on the business performance of the practice and that they are also in tune with the corporate personality of your practice (do you have a corporate personality?).

Leading doesn't mean micro-managing

No-one likes someone constantly looking over their shoulder. Sometimes, great leadership in a practice involves doing less, not more - by giving people the space to find ways of delivering the objectives that have been set and agreed. This is a change that has taken place in many industries, the shift from giving people tasks to giving people targets with no set way as to how they should be delivered.

Put the customer at the heart of everything you do

Think about call centres located in far off places...are they for our benefit or the benefit of the companies we're trying to get answers out of? To me, they are the perfect example of companies losing sight of who they are there to serve. One of the key drivers of a successful front desk is to put the customer at the centre of all of your thinking. Just ask yourself what you would want if you were the customer and develop ideas from this perspective.

The team wins or loses together

Many front desks are manned by a team of people and it's important that the team is close knit. The definition of a team is a group of

people with a common purpose. So, it's essential to set realistic yet stretching goals for the team as a whole and clearly identify individual roles in delivering those goals. Once the goals are set you have something tangible that can be managed, monitored and reported on through regular meetings.

When working with a front desk team, the goals can cover a number of things but most usually we look to improve the number of patients joining a membership scheme, the conversion of new patient enquiries into booked appointments, reducing gaps in diaries and increasing the levels of patient satisfaction.

Don't rest - keep raising the bar

Frequently we need to discuss and teach new skills so that individuals feel equipped and trained to deal with the type of scenarios that are likely to happen in the daily running of a dental practice. These skills can be discussed, practised, documented, but most importantly, need to be reviewed. Far too often dental teams start a new system full of good ideas and over a period of time the system becomes unravelled and a front desk reverts back into a group of individuals who just happen to be working in a dental reception. The key to sustaining momentum is to keep raising the bar and not allowing staff to become bored or complacent.

Get to know your patients...individually

Front desk teams often under-estimate the expectations of new and established patients. Some front desk teams complain to me that patients are demanding. However, a demanding patient will also appreciate excellent service and treatment. Patients are far more knowledgeable now than in previous times, they research and then evaluate your practice's performance, and your team needs to understand this and work to meet their expectations. Patients are choosing to invest in your skills, both clinical and non-clinical and it is the front desk team's responsibility to want to respond to these expectations in a very positive way. One way of breaking down barriers and engaging with patients is to get to know them on a personal level - what are their hobbies, where have they been on holiday, what's the name of the dog they've tied up outside? People will be interested in you and your practice when you've taken the time to take an interest in them.

Monitor constantly and fail fast

New ideas don't come with any guarantees. What works for one practice might not work for another. The only way to find out if an idea works is to try it and then monitor results so that it can either be rubber stamped or stopped. The key here is to find out what works and what doesn't, quickly. Don't let things that don't work drag on, stop them and move on to new ideas.

The front desk is such a key driver of success in your practice.

Ask yourself, are you dedicating enough time and energy on developing this critical operation, or are you taking a 'que sera, sera' approach? The strongest piece of advice I would give to any practice is to take control of the front desk and make sure that it is working positively in your favour at all times. This requires a team effort and a clear focus on the outcomes.



Emma John is a business manager and co-owner of the multi-award winning Absolute Dental and Absolute Dental Training. Emma has been providing front desk training workshops nationally to dental teams for the last five years with outstanding results. Emma is also an examiner and tutor working with practice managers studying for the Diploma in Practice Management.

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