

The retention revolution: Why your existing patients are your most valuable (and neglected) asset

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A Strategic Imperative for the Modern Dental Practice

We operate in an age of relentless competition. Digital ads clamour for attention, new “smile studios” promise instant transformations and patient loyalty often feels like a relic of a bygone era. In response, many practices pour resources into the front door of new patient acquisition – often at great cost – while a quiet, costly leak drains from the back: the steady attrition of existing patients.

This article posits a fundamental shift in mindset. The single most powerful, cost-effective and sustainable growth strategy for your practice is not in the next Facebook ad campaign, but in your existing patient database. Welcome to the **Retention Revolution**. It's time to stop marketing at your patients and start building a practice with them, focusing on the profound metric of **Lifetime Patient Value (LPV)**.

The Cold Economics of Attrition vs. Retention

Let's ground this in data. The Bain & Company axiom that a **5% increase in customer retention can increase profits by 25% to 95%** holds profound truth in dentistry. Consider:

- **Acquisition Cost:** The cost to attract a new patient – through advertising, special offers and practice time – can be 5 to 7 times higher than retaining an existing one.
- **Lifetime Value:** A retained patient is not a single procedure. They represent years, often decades, of recall visits, preventative care, family referrals and planned treatments (crowns, implants, orthodontics). Their LPV can easily run into tens or hundreds of thousands of Rands.
- **The Trust Dividend:** Existing patients have already overcome the barrier of trust. They know you, your team and your environment. They are pre-sold on your quality of care. Marketing to them is not about persuasion; it's about activation and deepening relationships.

When a patient lapses, you don't just lose their next hygiene appointment. You forfeit their entire future health journey and the potential referrals they would have generated. The leak is a haemorrhage of future revenue and practice stability.

The Four Pillars of a Revolutionary Retention Strategy

Moving from theory to practice requires a systematic, data-informed approach built on genuine care. Here are the four pillars:

1. The Intelligent Recall System: From Generic Reminder to Personalised Health Invitation

The recall system is the beating heart of retention, yet most have barely evolved from postcards and robocalls. Revolutionise it.

- **Segment Your Database:** Not all patients are the same. Use your practice management software to segment by:

- **Clinical Need:** High-periodontal-risk patients, orthodontic retainers, complex restorative plans.
- **Behaviour:** Always on-time, frequently reschedules, historically lapsed.
- **Demographics/Psychographics:** Young families, time-poor professionals, retiree patients.

- **Personalise the Communication:** A segmented list allows for tailored messaging.

- To the perio patient: *“Ms. Khumalo, as part of our ongoing management of your gum health, Dr. van Niekerk has scheduled your 4-month supportive periodontal therapy appointment for June. Let's secure your preferred time.”*
- To the parent: *“The Patel Family, it's that time of year! We have set aside back-to-school check-up slots for Anesh and Priya. Book together and save time.”*

- **Multi-Channel Engagement:** Meet patients where they are. Automate SMS reminders (highest open rate), but follow up with a personalised email containing a short educational video from their hygienist. Use WhatsApp Business for confirmed appointments and pre-visit forms. The goal is a *communication continuum*, not a single, forgettable ping.

2. Beyond the Chair: Establishing Practice as a Centre for Education & Community

Transform your practice from a transactional “fix-it” shop to an indispensable source of knowledge and support.

- **Host “Lunch & Learn” Workshops:** Monthly or quarterly events on topics like:
 - “Nutrition for Healthy Gums & Teeth”
 - “Sleep Apnea & Oral Health: The Silent Connection”
 - “Invisalign & Adult Orthodontics: What You Really Want to Know”
 These position you as an authority, foster community and naturally lead to treatment discussions in a low-pressure environment.

- **Create “Patient Journey” Content:** For patients undergoing medium-to-long-term treatment (e.g., implants, full-mouth rehab, Invisalign), provide a personalised digital “journey pack.” This could be a simple PDF or a series of emails with anticipated milestones, care tips and reassurance. It reduces anxiety and builds engagement throughout the process.

3. The Ethical Referral Engine: Harnessing the Power of Advocacy

Your happiest patients are your most powerful marketers. Activate them ethically and effectively.

- **Formalise a “Member-Get-Member” Programme:** Within strict HPCSA ethical guidelines (no direct payment for



referrals), create a valued-based reward system.

- "Thank you for referring your colleague. We've added R500 to your personal 'Smile Savings' account to use towards any future aesthetic or elective treatment."
- Or offer a premium at-home care kit or a professional teeth whitening session after a certain number of successful referrals. The key is to **thank, not pay**.

- **Make Referrals Effortless:** Provide existing patients with beautiful, simple "referral cards" or a dedicated page on your website they can easily share. Have a system to track who referred whom so you can always express gratitude.

4. Data-Driven Re-engagement: The "Lost Patient" Rescue Mission

A lapsed patient is not lost forever. They are a recovery opportunity. Implement a **Lapsed Patient Reactivation Protocol**.

- **Define "Lapsed":** Is it 18 months? 2 years? Set a rule in your software.
- **The "We Miss You" Campaign:** A warm, concerned, multi-stage outreach.
 1. **Personalised Letter or Email from the Dentist/Hygienist:** "Dear John, while reviewing our records, I noticed it's been some time since we've seen you. Your oral health is important to us and we want to ensure everything is on track. Please reach out for a convenient check-up."
 2. **Follow-up Phone Call from a Familiar Team Member:** "Hi John, it's Sarah from Dr. Smith's office. We just wanted to follow up on our note, see how you've been and if there's anything we can help you schedule."
 3. **A "Welcome Back" Offer (if appropriate):** A complimentary hygiene check or a discounted assessment to lower the barrier to re-entry.
- **Analyse the "Why":** When patients re-engage, ask gently why they stayed away. Was it cost, fear, time, or a perceived lack of need? This feedback is gold for refining your entire patient experience.

The Mindset Shift: From Clinician to Chief Relationship Officer

Implementing these strategies requires more than software; it requires a cultural shift. Every team member, from reception to dentist, must understand that **the patient's experience begins long before and ends long after the clinical procedure**.

- **Measure What Matters:** Track **Retention Rate** (% of active patients seen in last 18 months) and **Lapsed Patient Recovery Rate** as diligently as you track new patient numbers.
- **Empower Your Team:** Front-desk staff and hygienists are your retention champions. Train them in relationship-building communication and give them the autonomy to solve problems and personalise care.
- **Lead with Value, Not Volume:** Focus conversations on the value of ongoing health, prevention and the relationship you have—not just on the next appointment slot to fill.

Conclusion: Building a Practice That Endures

In a competitive market, the practice that wins is not necessarily the one with the flashiest website or the deepest advertising budget. It is the practice that understands a profound truth: **the deepest well of growth, stability and professional satisfaction lies in stewarding the health of those who have already chosen to trust you.**

The Retention Revolution is a return to the core of our profession – ongoing, relationship-based care – supercharged by modern tools, data and strategic thinking. It is the path to a practice that is not just busy, but truly resilient; not just profitable, but profoundly valuable to the community it serves.

Start your revolution today. Look at your recall system. Talk to one lapsed patient. Plan one educational event. Your most valuable patients are already in your chair. It's time to make sure they stay for a lifetime.

Invest in the relationships you already have. The return will define your future.