Lessons from Fine Hotels

By Linda Julian

Each time I stay in a fine hotel, the experience is both enjoyable and truly impressive. And I'm struck by how different my guest experience is from client experiences at many professional services and dental offices. For a couple of hundred dollars a night spent with a fine hotel, my service experience is much different to that of patients who spend thousands of dollars on dental implants.

Let's learn some lessons from fine hotels, exquisite resorts, and the best cruise lines: they can teach us so much.

Every guest is greeted warmly by every staff member, every time.

Whether in contact with the general manager, cashier, room attendant, or person arranging flowers in the lobby, hotel staff invariably initiate a friendly "good day" with a smile.

Wouldn't this be a nice start for every dental office client?

I am made to feel that I matter and the value of my business is noticed.

The hotel general manager recognizes frequent guests with a note, a card, maybe some small gift, and adds their welcome. It's usually hand signed -- presented at the front desk, waiting in room on arrival, or delivered soon after.

Contrast this with how professional firm clients too often feel taken for granted or underappreciated. Showing appreciation for your client and their business -- in deeds and in words -- is always a good idea.

In a host of small ways, hotel guests are noticed and treated as important.

By the second day of my stay, hotel staff seem to remember me and give me a sense that I "belong" there. They remember that I like a cappuccino with breakfast and grapefruit rather than orange juice. By the third morning, they ask me whether I'd again like the mushroom omelette (which I ordered two days in a row).
Too often preferences, foibles, and idiosyncrasies of professional services clients are overlooked or unnoticed on subsequent visits. In dental practices, it is easy to capture and retrieve this information in your patient management system.

**Fine hotels always welcome guest comments and make it easy for me to offer my feedback.**

They politely acknowledge my comments, compliments, even occasional complaints, and go so far as to give me a sense that they've really taken my input aboard.

Contrast this with some professional firms that don't want, let alone seek, frank client feedback. These same firms tell me variously that "we know the clients are happy" or "if we send a survey, the clients might make an adverse comment or complain".

In these days of social media, you can take advantage of a pleased patient before they even leave your chair. Ask them to tell you about their experience and, if positive, to give you a review on Google.

When a client goes to his or her dentist, it is for your expertise. When they're a guest at a fine hotel, it's both for accommodation and the entire guest experience. While service is no substitute for professional substance, technical prowess is rarely sufficient.

**We can also learn much from great teamwork strongly in evidence at fine hotels, on the best cruise lines, and at exquisite resorts.**

From the moment I approach the entrance, I get a strong sense that every hotel team member is respected by their colleagues (at least in my presence).

Everyone gets that it takes the whole team operating as a well-oiled machine to deliver stand-out service because they make it about me, rather than about them.

Hotels recognize and reward exemplary service delivery by team members. Clever technocrats and senior management don't get "employee of the month" accolades: instead, it's the laundry person who tracked down a guest's lost garment, a pastry cook faithful to 4 am starts, or the parking attendant who came in for so many compliments.

Staff of fine hotels always look perfectly composed and give me a sense that they do have time and attention for me. No complaints that they're frazzled or boasts that they're overworked, no matter how frenetic things are "out the back".

Service rituals of the finest hotels are so consistent and seamless that they appear "natural". Fact is they aren't. Hotel staff are trained, coached, and retrained until right responses become second nature.

Too often, dental practices limit training to technical competence.

**As dentists, you can draw several lessons from fine hotels. These include:**
• They think less about differentiating themselves from others than about being truly excellent in all they do.
• These organizations aim to be perfect in every detail -- not just getting the substance right.
• Every client interaction with every function and each touch point is important, every time.
• Every member of the team knows that they are there to do their own specific set of tasks, plus provide service that will build reputation and bring paying business back, time after time.
• Often, it's the little (and perhaps not so clever) things which count.
• When things go wrong -- and sometimes they do, even in the very best establishments -- the fine hotel comes shining through with immediate attention from staff empowered to resolve a problem to the guest's satisfaction.
• When there's been a problem, the best hotel goes the extra mile and lays on a little extra attention to make amends and restore goodwill.
• They know "the word gets out there".
• They know the markets and clientele they want to attract and keep.

If fine hotels can produce excellent service experiences at every level of the organization, with staff who are not all highly educated, all super smart, and all highly paid, then it must be possible for dental practices to go a long way down this path -- their impressive qualifications, supposed superior intelligence, and high remuneration notwithstanding.

Dental practices spend much on promotions and marketing, improving their brand, sponsorships, advertising, winning awards, and amplifying fine points of difference from their competitors. Imagine how much there is to gain from taking some lessons from fine hotels ... and, mostly, it costs next to nothing to roll out, or it's free.

Linda Julian founded Julian Midwinter & Associates (JMA) in 1993. Find out more about how JMA helps professional services firms attract, win, grow and retain clients at www.julianmidwinter.com.au