

What show is your reception team putting on?

One thing I say a lot when working with dental practices is this: **"Your waiting room has an audience – and reception are on stage, whether they realise it or not."**

Now, before anyone imagines I want front-of-house teams sitting in silence like they're in detention, that's not the point at all. Patients want warmth. They want personality, smiles, humour and friendly conversation. Nobody enjoys walking into a dental practice that feels cold and awkward.

But there's a fine line between friendly and forgetting there are patients sitting three feet away, waiting to absolutely everything. And honestly? They hear far more than teams think they do. Scrolling through their phone does not mean they aren't listening.

This is one of the most common things I see in practices. Reception teams become comfortable with each other – which is lovely in many ways but, over time, the desk can start sounding less like a professional front-of-house and more like a kitchen table chat during dinner.

Patients may not understand dentistry, compliance or treatment planning, but they are incredibly good at picking up atmosphere. They notice the dramatic sigh after

somebody hangs up the phone. They notice the eye roll when a patient asks another question. They hear comments about "difficult" patients. They hear frustrations about clinicians, diaries, staffing problems and business worries. And yes, they absolutely hear that Sue's boyfriend slept on the sofa after an argument about whose turn it was to empty the dishwasher.

Once walked into a practice where a patient sat quietly in reception while two team members debated whether one of them should dump her boyfriend because he "still shares a Netflix account with his ex." Meanwhile the patient was sat there wondering whether this was the right place to trust with her implant treatment.

Another practice had a full-volume discussion about whose husband had booked a lady's holiday to Ibiza "at his age." There were a couple of gents of a similar age in the waiting room, who I'm sure I saw flinch.

Now, some patients probably do find this entertaining. There's always someone who enjoys a bit of live daytime drama while waiting for the hygienist. But plenty of patients don't. Some are anxious, embarrassed, worried about treatment costs or simply wanting a calm environment.

And the bigger issue is this: Patients don't separate reception from the clinical side of the practice. To them, it's all one experience. If the reception area feels chaotic, negative, unprofessional or tense, patients often assume that same energy exists behind the surgery door too. That's the bit teams sometimes forget.

A patient sitting quietly on their phone may actually be listening to every word while building an opinion about your professionalism, your culture and whether they trust the practice. And trust matters massively in dentistry.

Front of house is so much more than answering phones and booking appointments. Reception sets the tone. It creates the atmosphere patients walk into and remember afterwards. The good news is this is usually easy to improve once teams become aware of it.

Most people aren't trying to behave unprofessionally. It's normally habit, familiarity, stress or simply forgetting how open reception spaces really are.

- Small changes make a huge difference:
- Keeping conversations appropriate for the environment
- Avoiding visible frustration
- Being mindful of tone and body language

- Supporting each other professionally in front of patients
- Remembering that "private conversations" in reception are rarely private

And leaders do need to address it – not aggressively, but clearly. Because culture at reception doesn't happen by accident. Teams take their lead from what is accepted, ignored and repeated every day. The practices that get this right create an atmosphere where patients feel welcome, calm and reassured before they've even sat in the chair. And in an industry where reputation spreads quickly, those little moments all reception matter far more than people realise.

So, next time you walk through your waiting room, ask yourself: If your reception team are putting on a show... what's the audience going home thinking about? ■

About the author
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Best in show?

BADN recently attended the Dentistry Show at the NEC in Birmingham – a welcome return (almost) to the shows of past years, with a large number of both exhibitors and punters, and not too many non-dental stands!

The Dentistry Show also has the advantage of a Dental Nurse Forum, which on the Friday was chaired by BADN. Many thanks to Janet Pickles of V.A Medical, Rachel England of the Oral Health Foundation, DeCon Patis, Faiza Aeshad and Harresh Lambourn, as well as BADN's Rebecca Silver and Prentice Hylton, for their presentations.



There was also the Dental Nurse Lounge – a sad, unloved, empty space with a few tables and chairs... A million miles away from the Lounge which we hosted back in 2022 when it had coffee, cakes and goodie bags. If any companies are interested in sponsoring the Lounge next year, please contact me on pan@badn.org.uk

Following their success at Showcases, the BADN trio of ducks made a further appearance at this show – Richard Duck (aka Dick Duck) who, since his debut at ExCel has received a PhD so is now known as Doc Dick Duck, and his two brothers, Robin Banks and Justin Cass, hid themselves on various stands. Any dental nurses spotting them and reporting back to the BADN stand received either £10 or £20 off their membership, or a free year's BADN membership – according to which duck they spotted.

BADN (and the ducks!) will also be exhibiting at the Scottish Dental Show in Braehead on 12-13 June; President-elect Carolyn Roberts will be speaking on both days. Come and visit us!

And shortly after that, the "cooling off" period ends and – if all goes according to plan – BADN should merge with Community, the Union, allowing us to continue supporting and promoting dental nurses and the dental nursing profession.

Watch this space! ■



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