



# Making sense of “failed to attend”: Techniques for getting patients to show

By Julie Parker

**F**ailed appointments (FTAs) come with the territory of managing a dental practice. They cause disruption to the practice through both the financial loss imposed and the ordeal of having potentially unpleasant conversations with patients who may routinely miss their appointments.

It is common for many industries to charge a missed appointment fee when patients or customers fail in attendance. However, I think dental practices should think carefully before adopting this process.

For example, a physiotherapist can charge a cancellation fee of, say, \$70 and have it cover the financial loss to the business. A dental practice could not ethically charge what their patient would have been invoiced had they attended for treatment, as it would likely be in the hundreds of dollars. A more reasonable fee of approximately \$100 is usually charged. While this amount does not come close to covering the practice financial loss for this time, it is an amount that many would consider a deterrent for future failed appointments. The risk with charging this cancellation fee is that patients may consider their payment a “leveller”. That, once paid, everything is now even again, and your practice has been made whole. However, this is simply not the case.

I suggest the better approach is to look at why patients fail appointments and develop systems that address these reasons.

## Why do patients fail to attend and what to do about it?

### 1. Unawareness of practice expectation

**I**t seems odd, but it’s true: unless we tell our patients that FTAs are unacceptable, then they won’t know.

There are numerous ways you can communicate to patients that FTAs are to be avoided. Such as:

- State it on the appointment card;
- If they are just 5 minutes late, call them immediately and enquire as to how far away they are. You need to indicate to them that every minute counts and that people are waiting on them to arrive; and
- When booking an appointment, if the patient seems conflicted whether it is a suitable time, then suggest something more suitable. Decrease the chance of the patient getting to the day and then finding they can’t make it after all.

### 2. Forget

**P**eople get busy and forget things. Or they are not organised and forget plans they make. Or something big happens in the morning and they are distracted for the day and forget.

We can’t stop people being forgetful, but we can put systems in place to remind them. Confirm all appointments!

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### 3. Afraid to cancel

**G**iving patients a hard time for cancelling or changing their appointment will work against you. Remember that any notice of a cancellation is better than no notice. If the patient must bear an emotional cost when they call, they will simply avoid calling. Manage late cancellation phone-calls in a positive and polite way. You can still communicate that the situation is not ideal without being belittling.

### 4. Early relationship

**Y**ou are less likely to see long-standing patient’s fail to attend their appointments. It is usually the newer patients of the practice. Developing rapport and a deeper relationship more swiftly will result in patients showing a stronger commitment to holding up their side of the positive, friendly relationship. This is done by engaging the patient in conversation and getting to know them more intimately. What do they do for work? How do they spend their free time? What topics of discussion do they enjoy? A deeper relationship is one that extends beyond the formalities of a “retail” relationship.

## 5. Lack of engagement

**P**atients who lack ownership and responsibility in the treatment they have booked in for are more likely to fail to attend. The lack of engagement means they do not fully accept the benefits of receiving the treatment and don't perceive there are any drawbacks to disregarding the treatment.

Achieving patient engagement requires an understanding of human behaviour and determining how best to create the right environment for patients. Team training will give your team the greatest chance of succeeding.

## 6. Pre-booked slots

**W**hile pre-booked slots deliver benefits to your appointment book management, they can hamper your attempts to reduce a high FTA rate. The process of setting aside "pre-booked slots" for new patients and specific treatments restrict appointment book flexibility. There will be a section of your

books that have patients scheduled at times that may not suit them. The patient's attendance requires them to re-arrange other areas of their life. While they are booking the appointment, dentistry is of high priority so they believe they can shuffle other, less important things around. However, by the time the day of the visit comes, dentistry has dropped in

importance and the other areas of their life are given priority.

Developing processes that encourage your patients to value their relationship with your practice and meet your expressed expectations of them will not only improve patient attendance rates. It will also improve your team's ability to provide excellent care and service.

## About the author

*Julie Parker's whole career has been devoted to the dental industry, starting in 1987 as a dental nurse. In 2003, Julie became the first non-dentist to buy a dental practice in Australia. She owned and managed her practice in Brighton, Victoria for 10 years. During this time, she more than trebled the turnover and her staff base grew from 3 to 12 members. Julie successfully cultivated a winning team and a winning business. Her business programs on how to accomplish a dream dental business are gleaned from her wealth of experience, intensive education and an inquisitive business mind. Julie is a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Time Line Therapy and Hypnotherapy.*

*Julie Parker Practice Success offers a subscription based program that educates all dental staff in the building and managing of their practices. Members receive monthly audio CD's and workbooks that lead them along the path to personal and team success. All team members, including the dentists, receive Certificates of Completion each month for submission for non-clinical CPD points and inclusion on resumes. Memberships are available for \$395 per month. For more info, see [www.julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au](http://www.julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au).*