

PATIENTS ARE TALKING. ARE YOU LISTENING?

Over the last two decades, dentistry has moved from a “needs” based profession to a “wants” based. Patients don’t really need cosmetic dentistry, implants, sedation, sleep apnea appliances, fast braces....: They choose to buy them. This is the sign of an affluent society that is obsessed with the way they look. This has been great for dentistry and has made us all more financially secure. With this increase in type and number of products we can present to our patients, we have also entered a consumer driven market place: Nothing happens until the patient says yes. “Consumerism” has become a buzz word embodying your ability to give patients what they want, when they want it, and at a price that they can afford it. What you think or want doesn’t matter. It is all up to the consumer to define what “quality dentistry” really is or is not. At a time when patients vote with their feet, with increased competition from other dentists and corporate practices, added to the already dominant insurance incursion, you have a different ball game that most of us struggle to understand. If you fail to listen to what your clients are saying and asking for, you are destined to struggle to compete in tomorrow’s dentistry. You asked for it, and you got it. Welcome to the new face of dentistry. Are you listening to your potential patients?

If you are finding yourself with or less than 25-30 new patients a month, fewer than a 50% direct referral rate, struggling to pay your bills, while slowly entering a death spiral when it comes to increases in productivity, then the public has already voted. The results say: YOU ARE NOT LISTENING. You are definitely not listening to the consumer if it is becoming more difficult to compete and you are struggling to get at least a 10-15% increase in productivity a year while constantly lowering your overhead. The good news is that there are strategies and actions you can take right now to improve your results. The neat thing is that 95% of the dental practices out there are clueless.

There is no way at getting better at giving patients what they don’t want. If you have reached a plateau, and just can’t seem to break out, embrace “consumerism” and learn how to inspire your patients. The Webster’s definition for CONSUMERISM is *the promotion of the consumer’s interests*. While a lot of you turn up your noses at what you might think consumerism represents, I would have to say that Mr. Webster thinks it is almost Biblical. It almost sounds from this definition that you might substitute the “Golden Rule” for it. You could take it a step further and assume that you need to “serve” your patients. The key here

is to identify what the “consumer’s needs are”, not what “you” would have them to be.

Ask yourself this. Is my practice more about me, the procedures I do or don’t like to perform, the hours I do or don’t want to work, the area of town where I do or don’t want to be located, or is it focused on my patients interests and needs. A failure to grow in any environment is a clear signal that you have lost all relevance to your patients. Failing to inspire them should have been a clanging siren of distress, but most of the dentists out there seem deaf to a very clear message from the buying public.

The old model of dentistry that we were taught in dental school is dead. It was replaced in the early 90’s with a new paradigm of smile makeovers and self-proclaimed pseudo specialists who have limited their practices to the top 2-3% of the population that wants, and can afford the new “*cosmetic ortho sleep implant sedation makeover*” new product of the hour couched in high pressure sales techniques. The “cosmetic” only practice has seen its day. Using sedation, implants, cosmetics, sleep dentistry... as your only outreach has become a self-limiting growth strategy that most of the general population no longer finds attractive.

Is the Monday through Thursday, 9-5 practice model becoming the dinosaur of the profession? (Absolutely) How are you going to compete against highly funded corporate practices or even National Health Care as it continues to morph and consume more of our patient’s health care attention. It’s time to pull our heads out of the sand and take a look around. Managed care is not going away. The cost of running a business is not diminishing. With almost 5300 graduates a year from dental school, senior doctors delaying or never retiring, retired doctors coming back into dentistry, and doctors letting their associates go due to lack of business, it is time to step back and come up with a better model.

What will the future look like in dentistry? One thing’s for sure; it’s not what you see today in 95% of the dental practices in the country. It won’t be located in any metropolitan area of over competition and eroding demographics. Allow me to give you just a short list of some of the areas you should be addressing in your practices.

- **Convenience:** The public wants consumer hours and a convenient location. These include but are not limited to 7AM to about 9 AM and 3 PM to 5 or 6 PM every day of the week. In addition that includes Fridays and Saturdays. Ever walk into a mall on a Saturday or Sunday? Are people there spending money? Why are they there?

The answers are obvious. They are spending money on the weekend because they work all week. Rethink your hours and add consumerism to them. In fact, consider your location as a convenience, whether or not you take their insurance, clean teeth on the first appointment and actually listen to the needs of your patients. One last area to consider is the “threshold test”. How many hurdles does a patient have to crawl over to get into your practice? I’m of the opinion that any answer to a patient’s request that cannot be answered with a yes, may be a significant hurdle that you and your staffs need to look.

- **Keeping prices comparable:** When was the last time you did a fee survey to see if your fees were in the ballpark for your area? Keeping comparable fees in the 80-90 percentiles is paramount to embracing consumerism. People shop and 98% of them want a good product for a fair price. Look at your fees and how you bundle them in case presentations and begin to listen to your public.
- **Eliminating double standards:** It’s funny how dentists complain about cancellations and no-shows, late patients, and patients who don’t pay their bills. I would have to say that most of you are never on time, are always running late, and always have maxed out credit cards and at least a month behind in paying your lab. Is it any wonder that your patients emulate your behavior? Take a look at the messages that you send out through your own actions and clean them up and “consumerize” this area of your practice.
- **The highest standard of cleanliness and sterilization in your offices:** This includes smells, bugs in the overhead lights, smudges on the carpet, landscaping outside, fresh paint, up to date facility, along with the maddening sounds of a high speed. Let your families take a critical look at your offices and consider their comments just to be scratching the surface of things you need to change, and change today.

- **The overall personal hygiene and appearance of your staff:**
Everything is marketing. Your staffs are the faces of your practice. Much of what you do is being judged by the way you and your office looks. Body piercings, body art, weird hair color, wrinkled uniforms or no uniforms at all say something about you and the work you do. It says you don't care, and if you don't care the patients are moving down the street to the next dentist.
- **Caring and compassionate staff:** I would have to say that every staff member I have met would say that they are caring and compassionate. The problem is that the public is the only one with a vote. So if you find yourself with less than a 50% direct referral rate and few new patients, you can feel secure that no one else that visits your office feels the love.

Keep in mind that all of us have a "donor" personality some time. We drive patients out of our practices without really knowing it. Consider this: A normal hygienist can see about 500 patients twice a year. If you are the average practice with 25 new patients a month, you would need to be hiring an additional hygienist every 24 months. If you've been in practice for five or more years and still just have one hygienist, your patients are telling you that they were not inspired. They will say it by never sending you a referral or returning for a periodic cleaning and exam. This very symptom of not seeing your hygiene department grow is a black and white signal that you are a donor practice that struggles with inspiring your patients. You are trying to give your patients something they don't want, and have long since stopped listening to the one person who could turn your practice around: The consumer.

This is a tough message to swallow, but also a message that can change your direction of practice. We send out a short email newsletter to all of our clients and I would like to send one to you each month. In addition to two or three articles a month that I write, we have clients write in and describe what is happening in their own practices. Believe it or not, these normal doctors in cities and towns all over the US are having the best months of their careers. Regardless of the economy, competition, staffing, and finances they are implementing ideas that continue to give them

month after month of record breaking success. Just email me at abernathy2004@yahoo.com and we will send on each month. I look forward to hearing from you.

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