

Hygiene Marketing

By Dr. Andrew Abramowicz

Any patient sitting in a hygiene chair is in a perfect position to judge our hygienists, our office décor, and our reception – essentially their whole hygiene experience. As a professional health care facility, what impression are you trying to convey? How does this match up with the impression that is actually conveyed. In most cases, the two are not the same. Asking your patients, especially those who you have known for a long period of time to critique their experience – you will be quite surprised at their answers.

Nine years ago we decided to change our hygiene “vision”. Hiring the coaching consulting team Dental Dynamics out of Brampton, ON, we discovered a whole new world of hygiene and the following office changes. Our appointment times were lengthened, our attention to the actual cause of periodontal disease and the multi-step process to get it under control, we changed our hand instruments and powered instruments, and separated the OHI and dental education into its own distinct appointment. The change in our language and attitude towards dentistry was so pervasive that once the initial phases were complete it was very hard to look back. We worked on the hygiene experience until it became second nature. The end result was a large group of healthier patients, a more relaxed staff, an increase in revenues, and a definite increase in hygiene specific recalls. New patients were specifically calling to book an appointment with a particular hygienist. Now, the all important question – “how much does this cost”? The overall cost of this change and to our new marketing strategy was zero dollars. With the increase in hygiene revenue, an increase in new patients, and a happier staff with less turnover, the consulting fees were recouped within the same year. From then on, we had the many benefits of the new hygiene vision.

Extending this one step further, it is well known that actually asking your existing patients to refer their friends and family has the greatest impact on new patients. The bonus is that it is a free form of marketing. The catch is that your office must have made that patient’s experiences “enjoyable” enough to want to return and put their name to the referral. Again we return to the experience.

In the book *The Experience Economy*, the authors B. Joseph Pine and James H Gilmore, contend that “Experiences are a fourth economic offering as distinct from services as services are from goods...”. “When a person buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf...but when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages-as in a theatrical play-to engage him in a personal way.” In your office, what has been staged for your clients to make the visit a memorable event? Some offices are already engaging in this type of “theatre” by arranging for aromatherapy, massages, manicures, pedicures, movies on demand, fireplaces in the waiting rooms all in the hopes of creating that memorable experience which would define their practice as a cut above the rest. What attracts new patients - your ad in the paper that your office provides the best root canals

in town or more likely that you provide a soothing and relaxing atmosphere where a patient can have their dental treatment performed. Personally, I would prefer the soothing atmosphere and trust that the office does provide the best root canals in town.

Theme parks, restaurants, even furniture stores “draw customers in through fun activities and promotional events.” There is no reason why a dental office cannot provide such an experience while still maintaining a professional atmosphere and top level expertise. Something even as simple as a hot towel machine in the office to offer to a patient after their hygiene appointment to clean and refresh their face can have a very positive impact. All in all, these marketing efforts are designed to attract the type of patients that you wish to treat. Sending out a consistent message that your office is professional, courteous, relaxing and even an enjoyable place to visit goes along way to establishing your practices as something different and worth attending scheduled appointments, paying for them and sending their friends and family for the same experience.

The one piece of the puzzle which can be a “bugaboo” from many offices is the concept of over booking hygiene. In this case, I do not mean overbooking your hygienists with more patients than your schedule can handle in order to circumvent the inevitable short notice cancellations and no-shows but rather the opposite. “Planned over staffing” your hygiene team for certain benefits that not be gained by any other means is a way to enhance the hygiene experience not only for your patients but also for the office as a whole. First off, consider this, if you have a highly trained team that is offering an exceptional experience and one of those team members is away for two weeks or on an extended leave, who can you get to fill in? Certainly any trained hygienist can do a certain amount but it will not be consistent with your office experience. If your current hygiene team has undergone extensive retraining with different hand instruments, powered instruments and “languaging”, a fill-in hygienist may not be able to work in your office at all, especially if there isn’t enough time to do all of the training that your present staff has undergone.

The second reason for planned overstaffing is the consistent message that if your patient is recommended a regular 3 month periodontal maintenance schedule, shouldn’t it be very close to every 90 days? The literature does support science around this but what if the patient’s hygienist is already booked solid for that time. As a professional hygienist in the practice, it would be appropriate to suggest to these patients that you feel that it is important to maintain their 3 month schedule but since your particular schedule cannot accommodate that timing, you would offer the services of another hygienist in the practice that does have that particular time available in their work schedule. Being confident that another hygienist in the practice will offer the same level of expertise to your patient but will also “refer” them back to you for the following 3 month appointment is certainly the hallmark of a professional hygiene team. Our office has been “overstaffed” for many years and has proven its effectiveness. Downtime for any particular hygienist can be creatively used to follow up on previously recommended hygiene treatments, care calls, hygiene treatment co-ordination or whatever task would demand someone with clinical knowledge. Having only 3 hygiene patients in a day can pay the wages of that hygienist so having the rest of the day “open” should not be

worrisome as it is a well thought out plan not poor scheduling or a lack of patients. This extra hygiene time is in addition to your normal schedule.

Remember, having a consistent team of professionals that offer a top notch service in a relaxing , comfortable atmosphere, where staff can be overheard having “fun” at work, offers an experience to your patients that can translate to a greater number of new referred patients to your practice. This type of marketing capitalizes on the “experience economy” and the free marketing plan of simply asking for the referral. All the office has to do is decide to do it and stick to the plan. The extra costs of “marketing” are actually hidden within the staff’s extra education, tools and “planned overstaffing”. I would rather invest in my staff’s education and office tools as opposed to a large yellow page ad which may or may not bring in as many new patients as a personal referral from a satisfied patient.

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Bibliographic information

Title: The Experience Economy
Author(s): B Joseph Pine, James H Gilmore
Publisher: Harvard Business School Press
Publication Date: 1 Jan 1999
Subject: Business / Economics / Finance
Format: Hardcover
ISBN 0875848192