

Win over price-shoppers

Stress your practice's emphasis on quality care and top-notch service.

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Sometimes the most profitable case is the one you walk away from. That seemingly counterintuitive message is an important business lesson that dentists should heed when faced with price-shoppers.

Here's an example: Last year, the Spanish airline Iberia needed to purchase a new airplane. To get the lowest price, Iberia asked two manufacturers, Airbus and Boeing, to compete against one another. Boeing was skeptical. It had never won an order from Iberia, but the company decided to make a proposal.

Both manufacturers were told their price was too high. Boeing tried, without success, to change the discussion from price alone to performance and long-term maintenance costs. Iberia refused to discuss anything but the cost of the original purchase.

Airbus and Boeing went back to the drawing board. They looked for various ways to cut their prices, and submitted new bids. Iberia then announced it was considering the purchase of a used airplane. Airbus made even more dramatic price concessions; it won the order but not much in the way of profit.

Maintain leverage

It's never easy to refuse business you feel you need. But when you're willing to walk away, the entire atmosphere, the leverage, changes. When Iberia indicated it wasn't interested in discussing value, what might have happened if Boeing replied that it was no longer interested in pursuing the business? Iberia may have changed its tune, and Boeing would have maintained a reputation for quality and integrity.

Remember, Iberia's original goal was to pit two suppliers against one another. If Boeing went home, Iberia would have lost all its leverage. No one is ever forced to lower her price; only you decide what you're worth. The more patients you have calling you, the less concerned

you'll be when you're not the right choice for a particular patient. That's why it's important to develop response-oriented, patient-centered advertising and formal internal marketing programs.

Not all callers who inquire about fees are looking for the cheapest dentist. Some callers ask about fees because they think they are supposed to; they don't know what else to ask. The important thing is that you should be proud of your fees, as they reflect the quality of the service you provide. But you should never just blurt out a price and hang up. Your goal is to instill a sense of value, and to floor the caller with your service.

Know what makes you unique

A patient concerned only with price may not be interested in what your practice has to offer. It's not easy to absorb the cost of standing behind your work, for example, if your profit margins are razor-thin to begin with.

Your receptionist should be trained to express an interest in each caller and the caller's problem. Every staff member must learn what your practice is all about, your unique selling proposition, and be able to express it in less than 30 seconds on the phone or in person.

You're not doing patients a service by keeping fees low. Raise your fees and watch yourself raise the quality of care you provide. Suddenly, you can spend more time with each patient; you can afford that new piece of equipment and take that continuing education course. The trick is to have high fees while making the patient feel that he is getting a bargain, which he is.

Instill value

Once you ask the right questions of your patient, you're no longer a commodity. You aren't McDentist anymore, but a trusted friend and knowledgeable counselor. Patients who check fees are as likely to choose the practice that conveys the greatest sense of value and service as they are the practice with the lowest price. You certainly wouldn't want to fill your practice with all the price-shoppers who choose the lowest-priced dentist anyway.

Yes, a price-shopper is interested in your fees. But what most of them really want from you is your time and attention. They want to know if you are the right practice for them. As callers shop around, they rarely get any addi-

with value

tional help and certainly little beyond a dollar amount as conversation. You're different. You can do more.

Certainly, if fees are discussed with a cold, "I've been told to tell you" attitude, the doctor will appear greedy and uncaring. Do not just blurt out a price and hang up. The phone scripts used by your staff should be designed to instill value. "I'd be happy to help you with our fees and affordable payment options, Mrs. Smith. So I can properly help you, please describe your problem or concerns."

Service starts on the phone

The most important thing with these phone calls is for the team member to offer the caller an appointment. Compare, "A cleaning and exam is \$200, okay? Good-bye," with, "A cleaning and exam is \$200. I'd like to help you by scheduling an appointment." Or better yet, "We can see you tomorrow at 2 p.m. if you'd like. I can reserve this time just for you. Is that time convenient?"

When answering the telephone you can't look into the caller's eyes, you can't smile at callers and make them feel welcome and you can't show them your incredible office and team. The only chance you have to let patients know that they've called someplace different is by providing exceptional phone service.

Make it personal

A typical caller to your practice might ask, "What do you charge for a crown?" The team member might respond, "\$800." Caller: "That much?" Team member: "Yes, it is." Caller: "Well, I'll have to call you back." Click! There's nothing wrong with quoting a fee. Patients respond to your honesty, openness and the pride and confidence you demonstrate. But how might this call have gone differently? Here's an example:

Caller: "What do you charge for a crown?"

Team member: "I'd love to help you with our fees. May I have your name, please?" Here's your chance to let the caller know you acknowledge him as an individual and not just another caller. Use the caller's name throughout the conversation. This is your first opportunity to bond with the patient over the phone. Simply quoting the fee and waiting for the response is not enough.

Now, answer the patient's question. Don't hesitate. Do it proudly. Team member: "Mrs. Shopper, the fee for a

crown in our office is normally \$900. May I ask, how are you feeling? Are there any problems I can help you with?" Here's your second chance to bond over the phone. Let the patient tell his story. Get the conversation going by showing interest in the patient's situation.

Showing this interest is the quickest way to let callers know you care about them. It's rarely just a fee that is the determining factor in choosing a dentist. Callers normally have other issues and need to discuss them with someone who opens the door. Be assured, no other office they've called has asked their name or what type of help they need.

Team member: "If you have a quick minute, I'd just like to tell you about our office and doctor. I know you'd be surprised to visit our office for the first time. It's immaculate and we'll have Dr. Wahl waiting for your arrival." In a quick sentence or two say what's best about your practice. No big story. Don't wing this every time, and let each team member make up her own points. Be unified and consistent.

Offer an appointment

Now offer an appointment. Don't ask, "Would you like to schedule an appointment?" Say, "I'd love to help you by scheduling an appointment. What's best for you?" Don't hang up without offering an appointment. So often a patient will wish you had asked. These callers are apprehensive, nervous and worried. Put them at ease.

Should the patient not wish to schedule at this time, it's still not over. Discuss the possibility of a future appointment.

Team member: "Mrs. Shopper, I would be happy to help you any time in the future. We'd really enjoy having you as a patient in our office. Do you have your phone-book in front of you? Our ad is on page 752. Please circle it and write down my name, Beth. I want you to have my name and number handy when you need to call me back."

This patient may have called five other offices today. Who else provided such caring service? If the patient goes elsewhere and is less than thrilled, to whom will she return? □

Dr. Wahl and Ms. Hollett of Office Magic are the developers of management and scripting systems for the dental practice. You can contact them by phone at 800-750-8779, or on the Web at www.officemagic.com to sign up for a free newsletter.

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