

Let the patient drive the conversation

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The great dental revolution is advancing and case presentation must also change. Old paradigms with old scripts need to be jettisoned. New technical skills require new sales skills. Create a new attitude with new paradigms and skills.

New attitude is confident, creating freedom for the patient to choose. It involves partnering with your patient and really listening. The old authority attitude was finding pathology as the need and talking patients into treatment—the worst kind of pressure sales!

The new sales model is a people game. Trust is the key to developing relationships that are dynamic and emotional. With no relationship established, we move the patient too quickly. We sound desperate as we offer quick solutions, talking only in terms of technical justifications. As a result, we burn through patients. Marketing cannot make up for a lack of skills in the sales arena.

Our dental agenda gets in the way of us truly allowing the patient to drive case presentation. If, after meeting a new patient, you begin formulating a result in your mind, without involving the patient, you have an agenda. The patient is not offered any choices, which creates pressure for your agenda. Remember the Hogan's Heroes television program where Sgt. Schultz always answered, "I know nothing." You must begin with nothing in mind and discover the patient's values.

Just relax. You do not have to be all business nor do you have to display the old sales persona. Truly embrace the new paradigm of finding out what patients want, not what you think they need. Your technical knowledge in the sales process will drive people away. Build value at the beginning of the appointment by helping patients uncover their interests and their "hot buttons." If they tell you early on that they want to keep their teeth, keep asking them questions along that line. Do not brush over a topic just because you have heard it before: "What would it feel like if you were to keep your teeth for a lifetime? Was anyone in your family unable to keep their teeth? How did they feel? How do you know?" Ask these and many more questions.

Keep patients talking 80 percent of the time. Your part is only 20 percent. Avoid technical conversations by asking emotionally-involving questions. After they say "yes" to treatment, then you can do perio probing, obtain informed consent, and lay on the technical expertise. In the sales process, ask right-brained questions that will elicit more emotion, not data. We all make decisions permanently, instantly, and emotionally. It is impossible to make a technical decision.

The conversation with patients is not an interrogation. We want to see ourselves as consultants or partners in a win-win situation.

Become part psychologist by discovering patients' real hot buttons. Only by asking questions, more questions, deeper questions, and more pertinent questions will we find ourselves on the path to building true relationships and uncovering what patients really want, rather than what we think they need.

I have heard doctors and their staffs object to sales preparation. "Patients come to us for advice," some will say, "and if we ask too many questions, we look stupid." That thinking is wrong and outdated. Experiment with offering choices in your practice. Try the old method of authority, pressure, and nonpatient involvement with one patient, and then ask questions of another patient, so this person is talking 80 percent of the time. Which consultation had the best result? How did your guest feel during your conversation?

Your questions must be open-ended, not "yes" and "no" questions. Try this line of questioning: "How can I help you? How long has that been a concern for you? How has that affected you? What have you done about it in the past? How did that work? What has been the emotional cost for you? Have you given up on it? What is your budget for something like this? What would you like to do now?"

Make an effort to involve your patients in treatment-planning. You'll find it emotionally and financially rewarding!

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