Who do your patients believe?

By Louis Malcmacher, DDS

This is a common scenario: you present a treatment plan to a patient — whether it is something as simple as a tooth-colored restoration or an endo, post, core and crown — and the patient goes home to think about it. The patient then says, “My hairdresser thinks that a root canal is a bad idea and I would rather just take out the tooth.”

You think to yourself what an idiot this patient must be. Here I went to dental school, have many hours of advanced continuing education, treat patients every single day, and instead of believing me, the patient is listening to her hairdresser? How in the world could a patient compare my treatment recommendation to the dental information she receives from a cosmetologist?

This scene will repeat itself many times over during your dental career. I’ll tell you exactly why it happens: There is an aura of believability that we as dental professionals sometimes don’t project. Think about it: this patient has come to your office, met your entire staff, you as the dentist did the examination and made a recommendation. It was all very clinical and confident, but was it believable? That connection is essential to forming a relationship where the patient will trust you and your team more than she will trust the dental IQ of her hairdresser.

I often say this in my lectures and I know this disturbs some dentists: Your patients have absolutely no way to judge your clinical skills. They don’t know if you are a better clinical dentist than the dentist down the street. They really don’t know what all of the diplomas on your wall mean. Truth be told, you go into many dental offices and they all have the same wall hangings of all the continuing education that they have taken. As a profession, people pretty much assume that most dentists know what they are doing, so how can your office be different from everyone else?

The answer is in the personal connection that you provide to patients. The easiest and fastest way to establish that connection is with the little chit-chat conversations that your team members have with your patients to get to know them a little better, find out about their families, hobbies, interests and what they do for a living. These are valuable pieces of information that you can incorporate into formulating how you are going to approach your treatment plan by making yourself believable and connecting with the patient.

It’s funny when a dentist tells me that his team talks too much to patients and they waste too much time in the office in conversations about what seems to be nothing. I point out that this can be the basis for building a great patient relationship, which then leads to a loyal, long-lasting patient.

The other very important piece that I believe adds value to a patient appointment is by pointing out some of the unique things that you do in your office that he or she may never have done before. The most valuable words that come from a patient’s mouth that I love to hear are, “Nobody has ever done that for me before.”

A couple of quick examples to illustrate what I mean. When patients come in, I tell them that I am using a Waterlase MD laser so that they won’t have to get a shot before their restorative treatment. Another patient comes in and has a periodontal abscess. I clean out the pocket and place Arestin by OraPharma. In both cases if I say nothing to the patient, the patient will not think that anything special has occurred. However, if I point out that I am using these patient-friendly technologies to make the patient’s visit easier, I am different from every other dentist out there and I am unique and uniquely believable.

Learn the valuable art of connecting with people. It takes only a few moments to be friendly and believable. Then, instead of choosing whom to believe, your patients will start referring their cosmetologists to you!