Retail is detail

Jonathon Fine discusses the finer features of your dental practice

Attention to detail can turn an average dental practice into an outstanding dental practice from the patients’ perspective.

As customers, we are continually collecting and simultaneously evaluating information. We are searching for clues that either reinforce our buying motivation or, just as critically, reduce it. Curiously, we often experience a huge sigh of relief when we discover that the retailer is not living up to our perceived understanding of their proposition. The sense of relief is driven by the fact we can stop processing the vast amount of multi-level information (sight, sound or scent) we are being hit with and simply accept the fact that this particular retailer is not right for us. We are quite pleased to move on.

How many times have you been motivated by a real need, marketing, or simply opportunity and entered a new retail environment with an expectation that has been shattered in a matter of seconds by a dirty or foul smelling environment, slovenly staff, poor lighting, or perhaps vast amounts of threatening signage? These are the obvious conditioners to our perception of the retailer and will have a massive impact on buyer behaviour. However, in all honesty, these types of problems belong to a retailing world of the 1970's and thankfully these types of conditions would be most unusual to come across today. The conditioners that affect buyer behaviour today tend to be subtler.

Typical Conditioners

- The location of the unit: next door to an Indian takeaway as opposed to next door to Boots
- Signage and packaging: how well does the signage communicate the retailer's core proposition to its target customers? Do customers understand what is being sold?
- The welcome: how easy is it to find the entrance and how welcoming is it? What are you presented with first in terms of smell? Many supermarkets pump a chemical into their air management system that makes the air smell of baking bread, which research tells us makes us hungry (hungry shoppers buy more) or the universal fact that every supermarket's first aisle is fresh fruit and vegetables, designed to communicate a halo of goodness and freshness over the entire 65,000 different products that are sold in a typical large supermarket
- What can you hear? Have you ever sat in a hotel dining room and listened to some screeching female vocalist belt out a love song in an extreme American accent whilst you are trying to eat breakfast? It’s incongruous, but worse it really spoils breakfast. Or how about PA systems operators in regional

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Are dentists indeed retailers? Is it important? The accepted view is that UK dentists are becoming very retail-savvy. There are countless examples of the so-called ‘dental spa’ with very un-dental type names being over represented in certain segments of the dental market. Make no mistake, dentists are and will become skilled retailers, however the detail point goes way beyond the ‘packaging’ of the practice.

Take 10 minutes out to try this little 10-point test: Put yourself in a prospective new patient’s shoes, visiting your practice for the first time:

2. Does the signage communicate the type of dentistry you provide? eg pain free, no needles or cosmetic, etc. Does it say new patients are welcome? Does it tell you the opening hours and does it tell you where to park?
3. On entering what can I hear? As a new patient I am naturally stretching to see if I can hear the dreaded drill. Instead, I hear a soundtrack from some birds tweeting gently in the background, along with some running water.
4. How do the people who work in the practice look? Could it be a tanning parlour, a Toni & Guy or an NHS waiting room? Not uniformed or uniformed, or maybe in scrubs? What is your overall conclusion of the team: frumpy, happy, young, senior, mainly female, gentle, professional, sloppy, dim, exciting...
5. Does the receptionist step out from behind the counter to welcome the new patient or does she simply look up and say: “Hello, where did you park? Please fill your registration number in here” (which is what my expensive dentist’s receptionist always does).
6. How are the toilets? Check them out at about 4.50pm, you might be shocked. Dirty toilets translate as dirty dentist, transmitting disease.
7. What is the range of magazines and how thumbed are they? People are perpetually thinking about cross-infection.
8. How is the clinical team addressed by staff? Is it Dr Brown or Gordon? Both could be correct depending on your practice’s positioning, but that is not always the reason first names are used. The captain of a BA 747 is always referred to as ‘captain’ by cabin crew, as it is critical his leadership is never compromised through familiarity.
9. What items are sold to me in a passive way through point of sale devices as I am waiting to see my dentist?
10. What happens when the treatment session is over? How is payment handled? Do I feel like the value has been reinforced so I leave contented?

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