About relationship-based dentistry: the 21st century formula for success

By Peter Barry

The 21st century is such an amazing time to be in our wonderful profession. From a technical standpoint we’ve got better diagnostic tools, better materials, and greater clinical and theoretical knowledge. Today, we are a much more experienced profession with diversely trained clinicians.

Compare this to how society saw us just 25 years ago when the services patients expected to receive could be grouped into one of five most common categories — drill, fill, pull, dentures, cleaning. In those days, the use of dentistry generally occurred when someone was experiencing a problematic dental condition that he or she could no longer ignore or live with.

The interaction in the office tended to be very generic, subservient and somewhat routine: Patients walked into the office clutching their wallets tightly while waving the almighty insurance booklet in the air. “Here’s my problem, Doc, what is the minimal thing you can do to fix it that will be covered by my insurance? And could you please keep the pain down to a minimum?”

This preamble was usually followed by the patient reluctantly passing the baton to the dental practitioners, at which point we proceeded to put the patient through a very clinical and somewhat routine system of diagnosis and treatment delivery. It was a very technical, un-emotional and generic process that locked dentistry into an insensitive, disconnected and reparative image.

The good news today is dentistry is undergoing a major transformation in the way we do business and serve our patients. The entire dental community — including labs, distributors, manufacturers and service companies — are one by one re-packaging (re-branding) their products and services into a more customer friendly, human touch experience.

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When people make a decision to accept your dental care they are actually making a decision to accept you. “You” the person, not “you” the dentist. The patient’s relationship with you and your entire team is the most important element in a successful practice.

Patients are committed to us, not to our facilities, our clinical procedures or our instruments. The difference between good dentistry and great dentistry will never be as clear to them or impress them as much as a good relationship with you will.

Their commitment to your business will primarily be based on how you make them feel while they are in your presence receiving your care. Simply put, people may forget what you said and what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel, and this memory will linger long after they have forgotten which tooth you crowned.

Let’s face it, as people and as dental patients it is our basic human nature to want to feel genuinely respected and cared for, especially when it comes to placing our health and quality of life in the hands of professionals. The challenge for our profession is in that with all the technical learning and training dentists receive, something begins to get lost and fade away. While vigorously pursuing clinical excellence, is it possible that we begin losing sight of the person attached to the teeth?

After years of coaching (consulting) dental teams and individual clinicians, it is my experience that our communication can very often appear cold and disconnected to people because it is delivered in a very technical manner devoid of emotion and humanity.

As a profession, if we are to succeed in altering the old-school negative paradigms society holds about dentistry then we must begin to look beyond the instruments we are holding in our hands.

In our hands, we are in fact holding the life and feelings of the person attached to the teeth. Patients are fil-
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personal relationships with each one of our patients. A people-centered business feels and sounds much different from the traditional, generic, transaction-oriented business.

We should all take a closer look at our own practice and explore where we stand in our human relations effectiveness. Are you merely processing your patients through a series of generic transactions or are you taking the time to get to know your customers, their beliefs, their desires and their fears? Two people can only achieve a strong relationship by reaching beyond the boundaries they usually maintain between themselves and strangers. When we reach out to patients we begin delivering a more connected, caring experience.

There is a buzz word being used today to describe what we are talking about: it is called “emotional intelligence” (EI). In our highly technological world, raising our emotional intelligence is becoming more and more important so as to not dehumanize the value of dentistry. Human talk, not dental jargon, is the language your patients will understand and feel inspired by most.

The following is a list of things we can do to strengthen our personal connection and overall ability to lead our patients:

• Before seeing your next patient, take a brief moment to clear any clutter from your heart and mind.
• When scheduling procedures always factor “patient connection time” into your estimated appointment length (reconnect with your patient on a personal level).
• Relationship building is a two-way process, which means that it’s all right to share personal stories that enable patients to get to know who you are as a person.
• Be genuinely curious and interested in patients, and avoid insincere dialogues (baby talk, overly sweet niceness, counterfeit sincerity, superficial pleasantries, etc.).
• At the end of each patient visit briefly ask yourself, “How connected was my last patient to me?” To find the answer, look into your own heart: “As connected as I felt to them and not much more.” Patients can feel our sincerity and this will be mirrored back to us through their feelings.

“Customer relations” is the main area where we can shine in our patient’s hearts, thereby cultivating intense loyalty. It is the new yard stick that will differentiate us in our patients’ hearts. Remember, no two practices can be virtually identical in the people they attract, the work they inspire, the information they pass on or the emotions and feelings they create. It is impossible! Human beings are too different and their interactions in different environments only magnify those differences. We all have walked into a company and immediately detected these forces at work.

Remember, we are not in the dentistry profession serving people; we are in the people business providing dentistry. Your dentistry gets you into a game where relationships win. Grow your business one relationship at a time.