



The new consumer culture in dentistry

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IN THIS AGE OF EVER-EVOLVING TECHNOLOGY, consumers have never had more options, information, and education at their fingertips. With a few keyboard strokes and mouse clicks, people can learn more about a product or service they're searching for, identify hundreds of businesses that provide that product or service, and pinpoint the right price. Consumers are now more knowledgeable and savvy than ever before, meaning it's necessary for businesses to adapt to these changes.

The dental industry is not immune to this consumerism shift. In the business of dentistry, patients are the consumers to whom dental offices market—consumers who are researching available dental care, comparing your services with others in your area, and expecting more from you and your team. This shift is not necessarily a bad thing, as it creates many opportunities to positively impact the health and livelihood of more people. As technology gives patients an increased power of choice, it also gives dentists the power to influence that choice through the values they communicate.

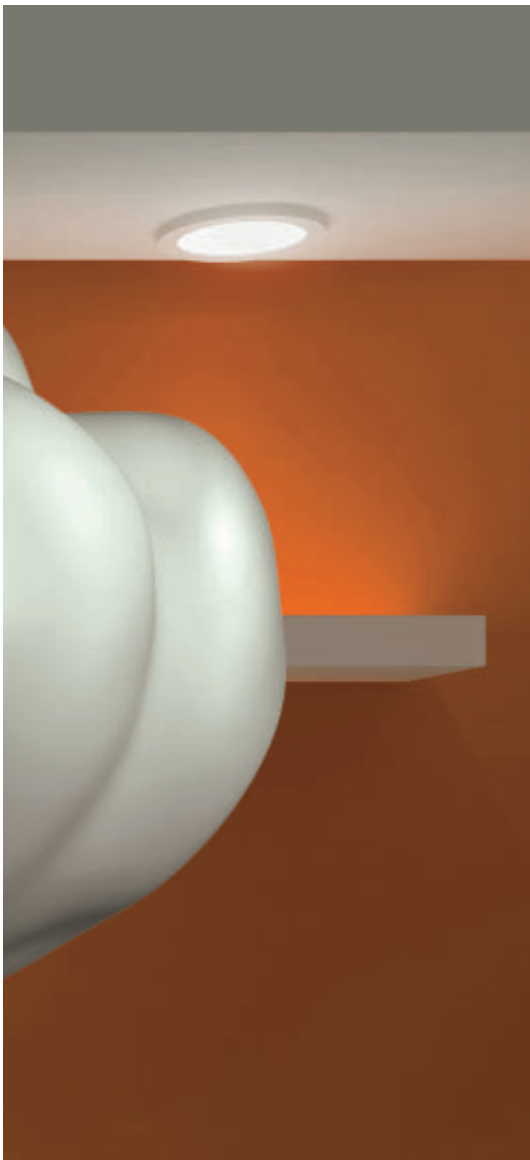
CAUSES OF THE CONSUMERISM SHIFT

The largest reason for this “shopper” culture is the rise of the Internet. The sheer volume of information, services, and products that can now easily be accessed online has

radically changed how businesses and consumers operate. In the dental industry, patients are researching dental services and becoming much more educated on oral health. As more information about the importance of lifetime care and the effects oral health on overall health is circulated online, patients are becoming much more health conscious. When choosing a dentist, they have the ability to browse all of the dental practice websites in their communities so they can compare services.

Office websites are not the only sources of information. Patients can access social media, reviews, and rating sites (Facebook, Google+, Yelp, Angie's List, etc.) that have office recommendations (and oppositions) left by patients. All of these sources have helped create the new “dental consumer.”

There are other contributing factors. With a tightening of insurance taking place, patients are often responsible for more out-of-pocket expenses. This leads them to evaluate dental services extensively in order to choose more economically. Saturation of dentists in certain areas is another factor. Several dental offices in one area that offer comparable services lead patients to evaluate other factors



besides general care, such as online reviews, convenience of appointment scheduling, a wide variety of restorative and cosmetic options, and more. Patients looking for the most cost-effective, convenient, and accommodating dental care will turn to the Internet to compare what is available.

ACCLIMATING YOUR ACTIONS

What actions can you take in your practice to adapt to this consumerism shift? First of all, evaluate your marketing methods. Are you communicating the right messages and values? Do you fully understand what your target demographic wants? It's important to build a brand for your office that stands out, especially if your area is highly competitive.

When marketing your services, promote "why" this care is important rather than simply "what" you provide. Define what positive outcomes can result and what negative consequences can be avoided. Since more patients

are searching for dentists online, use this to your advantage. A well-designed, user-friendly website that clearly communicates your mission and values will go a long way in setting you apart from others.

As the popularity of social media increases, I encourage you to also use these platforms. Proactively communicating your message through Facebook, Twitter, etc., is a great way to reach a large audience easily and inexpensively. In our latest initiative involving donating a smile makeover, we had potential candidates send us selfies as a way of introducing themselves. This drove tons of traffic to our website and created quite the buzz in our community. Check it out at mckinneydentist.com/selfie-smile-contest.

The services you offer can determine how you are perceived by dental consumers. Today's educated patients are looking for more than root canals, fillings, or extractions. Meeting these expanded wants and needs requires you to advance your skills in order to offer more services. We've seen the rise of Invisalign, immediate implants, treatment of snoring and sleep apnea, lasers for both dentists and hygienists, same-day CAD/CAM restorations (Planmeca CAD/CAM Solutions), and other expanded services.

No longer can you just *tell* patients you will make their smiles beautiful. They want to see it and see it now. With that in mind, we can now instantly, within minutes, digitally design smiles for our patients with Planmeca Romexis Smile Design. These advancements are helping patients enjoy more effective results in a more convenient manner. Providing all of these services under one roof is another way to stay in front of this ongoing consumer wave.

ACCLIMATING YOUR SURROUNDINGS

Today's dental consumers expect Wi-Fi throughout your office. We've taken it a step further and provided our own Internet Cafe to better facilitate patient laptop use. TV monitors in each operatory provide entertainment or patient education. Comfortable blankets, headphones, warm after-treatment towelettes, coffee, and cookies all add to the modern dental environment.

ACCLIMATING YOUR MINDSET

To carry out the right actions to satisfy dental consumers, you'll need to maintain the right mindset. Offering a wide variety of services will take you only so far. Today's patients need to know you will go above and beyond. You must treat people like they want to be treated. If a patient is in need of immediate emergency care, we get them in immediately.

It's time to step away from all the online dental forums, roll up your sleeves, and get to work. I've heard other doctors say, "I want to work smarter, not harder." This is simply not possible. Sometimes you have to work through lunch, rearrange your schedule at a moment's notice to accommodate emergency care, or have extended hours for patient convenience. You've got to be willing to do what the guy down the street isn't willing to do. This "extra mile" mentality has helped us distinguish our practice from the others and build ongoing relationships with our patients.

Also, cultivate patient education. More patients are taking the time to learn about oral health on their own, so foster this. Clearly communicate why you are recommending a specific treatment, the benefits that will result, and the problems that will be avoided. Educate patients; don't dictate to them. This will give them more trust in you and the treatment plan you present.

This consumerism shift is here to stay. As dental consumers become more knowledgeable and have access to more choices, they will expect more of their dentists. Embrace this. They will expect you to be hip to and understanding of this new digital dental environment. The next time a patient pulls out his or her cell phone to sneak a "mid-appointment-selfie-Instagram-Tweet," I suggest you go for the "photo-bomb." **DE**



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