

Case Presentations Should Sell Themselves

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By Alan Clemens and Ira Langer, JD

Many dentists feel discomfort during case presentations. After all, it can feel a bit like selling. But if case presentations make you feel like you're selling dentistry, then you're doing something wrong. Case presentation isn't about selling at all. The secret to a successful case presentation is that it starts long before you sit down with the patient to discuss the financial aspects of recommended treatment. In fact, you start building the foundation of case acceptance the minute the patient makes his first appointment.

So, if you're not selling treatment, how do you improve case acceptance? Stop treating teeth and start treating people.

Don't just treat teeth

You were trained to treat teeth. That's your job — to diagnose and to treat. Of course, you can't get to the treatment part until patients accept your recommendations. The reality is that two patients with the same exact conditions and who were presented with the same exact treatment recommendations may make very different decisions. By treating people rather than teeth, you can open up a whole new world of case acceptance. Dr. Keith Collins of Vancouver, Wash., explains, "Every one of us is there to help patients make the decision that's correct for them," he says.

One mistake many dentists make is assuming how much is too much when it comes to treatment recommendations.

"We all recognize the patient's ideal treatment plan," says Dr. Tom Hedge of West Chester, Ohio. "We can look in the mouth and see the need for a crown, a filling, a bridge, etc. Early in our careers, we may not always tell them their ideal treatment plan for fear of rejection or confrontation. As we mature, we learn to lay it out on the table. We let them know what needs to be done and let them decide — on their own timetable and budget. It's called comprehensive dentistry."

Cases that exceed thousands of dollars may seem overwhelming to some patients — but which ones? Do you know which patients value ultimate dental health over a less expensive treatment option? Mary Osborne, a dental communications consultant who developed the audiotope series titled Practice Renewal, advises us to not only listen to patients' medical histories, but also learn what patients want to avoid and what they want to attain. From improving their smiles to keeping their natural teeth, be sure to ask patients what is most important to them. Everyone, of course, needs to consider the cost. But if you tell a patient who values cosmetic dentistry that veneers will help him instantly have a younger smile and that veneers are durable and long lasting, the cost usually becomes less of an issue.

Find out what your patients' needs are and then recommend treatments that align with those needs. You'll be more successful. "Many patients, when exposed to what dentistry has to offer, will choose higher ideals than we would have thought," Collins says. "Our goal is to help them achieve their ideals in a practical way."

Elevate your patients' dental IQ

As you build long-term relationships with patients, you should be raising their dental IQ at each and every visit. That may mean repeating messages — after all, they're only seeing you twice a year. They need to be reminded about the importance of their dental health. Sell the Spouse Too

The intent to invest a few thousand dollars invariably becomes a family decision. Just because your patient understands why he needs the treatment you've recommended, don't expect that he'll be able to go home and effectively explain it to his spouse. You're asking him to be the salesperson that you don't want to be.

Arm your patient with information that can be taken home and discussed with a spouse. Whatever tells the story of why this treatment is necessary should be sent home with the patient — intraoral camera photos, digital photography, patient education materials, X-rays, etc.

"When we're going over the digital imaging, we give a copy to the patient to take home," says Dr. Debra King of Atlanta. "We're talking about tens of thousands of dollars, so they'll want to take these images of proposed treatment home and talk it over with their spouse."

And be sure to include patient-education information on your Web site. If a discussion comes up about one of the alternatives that you've presented, but the patient can't find or remember the supporting information, he can go to your Web site and search for the information there.

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Set up patient-education systems that offer thorough explanations in a consistent manner. Your staff should know when and where to cover topics including co-diagnosis, hygiene, and more. "Educate your staff. Help them represent fine dental care," says Collins. "Start first by helping your staff to learn about the advanced care you provide and to speak fluently about it. Staff members who advocate fine dental care can help patients commit to better treatment plans."

With these communication systems, you'll be sure that each patient is receiving comprehensive and accurate dental education. If you use an interactive patient-education program, it can do the "repeating" for you and your staff. And because it's visual, it's easier for the patient to understand and retain.

An intraoral camera shows patients the condition of their mouths. Be sure to revisit the condition as the months pass. Praise them for improvements and emphasize the risks if they seem to be slipping. It's a continual process. Interactive patient education emphasizes treatment options and alternatives. Direct them to your Web site for more information on their dental health.

Collins adds, "Patient education has helped my patients have a heightened awareness of their dental conditions. I've found we succeed best with patients by acting as their advocate. We strive to educate patients about their conditions and treatment choices. A part of our mission as health-care providers is to help people embrace dentistry as a source for optimum health. We also have a mission to help patients find confidence and credibility in dentistry."

The beauty of interactive patient-education programs is that they take the pressure off you to convince the patient that the treatment is needed. If done properly, the patient-education program makes the treatment decision obvious for the patient and effortless for you.

"I used to look like some kind of salesman," Dr. Les Prasad of North Attleboro, Mass., says. "But now I don't need to do that. I show the teeth on the intraoral camera, immediately flip the button to CAESY, and I sit down and drown myself in some daydream. When it's over, the patient turns to me and says, 'When should we do this, Doc?' Now I don't have to tell them anything — I just show them and they ask me questions. It's such a wonderful method because I don't come across like I'm a salesman."

Collins uses a similar method in his "Interactive Diagnosis Suite." It includes the intraoral camera and interactive patient education. "They're learning about the things that interest them about dentistry. We aren't selling things. We're introducing them to things they asked us to do," he explains. "And if something is on TV and a third party represents it, it lends credibility."

Giving them their money's worth

Dentistry is a health industry, but it's also a service industry. Since many of the services you provide are discretionary, it's important to give patients both high-quality care and service. Quality service is easy; it just requires attention.

Those practices that focus on cosmetic dentistry often go "all out" for their patients. "Some of your actions communicate louder than words," says Dan King, husband of Dr. Debra King and marketer for her practice in Atlanta. "A snack tray with gourmet cookies and fruit is available to them when patients arrive. There are massage chairs and moist towels after procedures. At every turn, there's a pleasant surprise. By the time patients have been visually treated, they are more likely to want to proceed with their treatment plan."

Even if your focus is not on cosmetics, you can adopt variations of these top-level services. Prasad says, "After a procedure has been completed, the patient gets a phone call from me that evening. I call up and say, 'I just wanted to check on you. You had a lot of work done today. Are you having any problems? Is there anything we can do?'"

"When patients leave the office, they leave with the feeling that they had a special treatment that they have never received from anyone else."

The extra service not only adds to the patient's comfort and strengthens the doctor-patient bond, it also helps patients feel good about their investment in the treatment that they just received.

Dentists aren't salespeople

For most people, dental health isn't black-and-white. The goals, values, and resources of your patients change throughout the months. Don't let past obstacles stand in your way of getting your patients to accept treatment. Osborne's audio series, *Redefining Hygiene*, warns of the risks in making judgments. "As you get to know your patients, your role is not to judge them for the choices they've made or to make any assumptions about what they will do in the future," she says.

Don't get discouraged if a patient doesn't accept your treatment recommendation the first time. It just means that either they haven't quite learned enough about dentistry to value the service, or you haven't targeted the message properly to their dental goals. Have your staff revisit and confirm the patient's dental goals, and then continue to educate. As soon as you and your patient are on the same page, case acceptance will naturally follow.

If you think it all comes down to the moment when the patient learns how much the treatment is going to cost, it's likely you will fail. Most dentists didn't go to business school. They have little or no training in marketing. So it's not surprising that the act of selling is foreign and uncomfortable. You and your staff shouldn't have to sell.

"I used to try my very best to try to sell cases before," says Prasad. "And dentists can be the lousiest communicators." Case presentation is a multi-level process, growing over time as the relationship with the patient grows. Rather than trying to get patients to comply to your recommendations, your focus should be on providing fine dental care and information that helps your patients decide what treatment recommendations to accept. Selling shouldn't enter the picture. The new model of dental communication is one of facilitation, empowering your patients to make informed dental decisions that are right for them.

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