



The myth of the ‘Magic Bullet’

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Dear Dianne,

I read everything I can get my hands on in an effort to improve my practice production. I want my patients to understand that it is so much better to prevent dental problems by being proactive and repairing their teeth, rather than waiting until something breaks. However, this bad economy is taking a toll on my practice, and I worry constantly about production. Do you have any ideas on how to get patients to understand the importance of being proactive regarding care?

Dr. M.

Dear Dr. M.,

It sounds like you may be looking for a “magic bullet” to convince patients to purchase dental care. Do you really believe magic bullets exist? What you are looking for is a way to make elective dentistry a necessity in the mind of the patient. Is that fair? While most of us would agree that there is always room for improvement regarding customer service, we also need to be realistic with our own expectations. What you need to do is step back and learn to think like a consumer.

What I am going to say is not popular, but let’s be real. If my tooth has a large restoration that is worn but currently serving me well and things are tight financially, I am not apt to replace that restoration until it becomes necessary. On the other hand, if I have ample disposable income, elective dentistry is within my means. It would be easier for me to be “proactive” in that scenario.

If I as a consumer am struggling financially to take care of the necessities of daily living (housing, food, transportation) and have no dental benefits, the only thing I want to hear from my dentist is how he or she can take care of me in the most cost-efficient way. I would appreciate my doctor telling me about the ideal treatment, but I would also want him or her to be sensitive to my situation and offer me something less expensive that might buy me a little

time should I need another option. If my dentist expresses empathy and helps me during a tough time in my life, I become a positive missionary for that doctor. And when my situation improves, I will get the crown that I need.

I think the mistake most doctors make is trying too hard to influence the patient’s decision. People are not stupid! They can usually see right through slick scripts and hard sell tactics. Since it is inappropriate to judge the financial status of our patients, the best idea is to give them the information they need on treatment choices and let them decide. Although patients may not always choose what we consider to be the ideal treatment, it may be the best treatment option for them at the time.

The good news is that business cycles come and go. We will weather this economic storm too. The valleys provide us with an opportunity to step back and “sharpen our saws” through greater efficiency, better understanding our patients, and improving our customer-service skills in all areas. What comes around goes around. When you and your staff members treat people well with an emphasis on caring and empathy, they will reward you by referring their friends and family to you. I advise you to relinquish the self-imposed pressure you have assumed, and treat your patients in a kind and compassionate manner, just as you would like to be treated if you were the patient.

I like to fish, but I do not catch fish every time I cast a hook in the water. However, I know that with persistence, the right bait, and favorable conditions, I *will* catch fish. On some fishing trips, I will be happily exhausted from reeling them in.

Remember, the ocean of people needing dental care is vast. The “bait” that works is caring and empathy. You will catch many medium- to small-sized fish ... and a big one occasionally. They all put food on the table. The practices that do the best in hard times are those who have the good business sense to appreciate *all* the fish. **DE**

Dianne Glasscoe-Watterson assists dental practices in achieving their highest potential through practical, effective on-site consulting. Her continuing-education courses help dental professionals refresh their knowledge base and reignite professional passion. Visit Dianne’s Web site at www.professionaldentalmgmt.com or e-mail her at dglasscoe@northstate.net.

