

Creating THE NEW DENTISTRY  
*by William Howard Horrocks*

I've written extensively about the subject of positioning in both of my books. This concept was first introduced to the business world back in 1981 by two visionaries (and my personal marketing gurus) Al Ries and Jack Trout, in their brilliant book, *Positioning, the Battle for Your Mind*.

This book is about the seemingly impossible task of how a business could get its marketing message heard in an age where we are literally swimming in marketing messages.

Ries and Trout went on to develop this idea, and many others, in a series of books which have since become classics in the marketing world. As of this writing their most recent is *The 22 Immutable Law's of Marketing*. I highly recommend this and all their works.

I won't go into a long explanation of the subject, and am loathe to even attempt a paraphrase of the masters, but essentially their message is this: a Position is how people view a product, profession, industry or anything. It's how people think of you and regard you in comparison to other known entities. Simply, what place do you occupy in peoples minds? And compared to what?

Position is not what you think about your business or profession. It's not how you regard yourself or what you think people ought to think about you, your practice or your profession.

It's not much about you at all really. It's about how others look upon you. A position does not reside in your mind, it resides in the minds of the public.

A position can be favorable, horrible or nonexistent which will have a great deal to do with determining your success.

Ries and Trout go on to describe how establishing, changing or cementing your position can help you deliver your marketing message in an over-communicated society.

## **Dentistry's Current Position**

My agency works with individual dental practices and one of our primary tasks is to create an effective position for them in the community in which they reside. But Dentistry as a profession also has a position in people's minds. And that's what needs to change. Changing it to something closer to the truth and more favorable will have a broad impact for every practice in the country.

## **How Does the General Public Regard Dentistry?**

After working with dental practices for nearly a decade and having surveyed thousands of dental patients, I think I have a pretty good idea of how "going to the dentist" is viewed by John Q. Public. It goes something like this: "going to the dentist is painful, stressful, expensive, and isn't something I'm going to do unless I really hurt or have some other very good reason."

Contrast that with what you and I (and precious few others) know to be the facts about Dentistry, which are: It's not that painful and, in fact, in the hands of a skilled practitioner, may be entirely pain free; you can use it to enhance your appearance and make yourself much more acceptable and appealing to others; the advances of the last few years make it easy to have the look you want; your teeth can be brilliantly white (even the back teeth); your breath can be fresh as a daisy; and besides if you don't take care of your dental health you may be setting yourself up for increased risk of heart disease and perhaps other ailments. Not only that, you can have a movie star smile in just a few visits and it's not that expensive especially compared to cosmetic surgery. The cost of a porcelain crown is actually less than what you'd spend on haircuts over the course of a year. Oh, and you can put it all on your charge card.

Quite a difference between how we are thought of by others vs. the truth, isn't there?

**Create Your Position or the Public Will Create One for You.**

It's clear that we need to reposition Dentistry to reflect the truth rather than the generally accepted ideas. We can either take an active role in determining how people view Dentistry, or we can endlessly complain about how misunderstood we are, how low the general dental IQ is, and how this must be the fault of the ADA , government, managed care, insurance companies or the Roswell aliens.

Changing the perception of Dentistry can be accomplished on a national level with a large public relations campaign. In fact, it's the only practical way to do it.

### **The Milk Farmers Did It. Why Can't We?**

You've seen the ads and billboards - a smiling Cal Ripken Jr., Patrick Ewing or some other celebrity, wearing a milk mustache and telling you that milk is good for you. In a very short while these ads have accomplished more for the milk industry than 100 years of motherly finger wagging ever did.

Please note that even though I've referred to these as "ads", this milk campaign is NOT really advertising. It is public relations (which is an actual and honorable subject in spite of what the political spin doctors have recently done to it). The ads do not suggest which brand of milk you should drink; only that drinking milk - any milk - is cool, hip and healthful. Thus anyone who sells milk benefits from this campaign, not just the sellers of Darigold or Lucerne. Public relations campaigns are historically more successful than ad campaigns precisely because they don't seek to sell the public a particular product. Because of this they meet with little or no sales resistance. A public relations campaign often viewed more as a public service announcement than an advertisement. Thus, it has more credibility than an ad campaign. This allows one to create a positive view of a particular class of product or service without pushing any specific one.

### **Changing Dentistry's Image**

I want to introduce an idea – a public relations idea - that will reposition dentistry from where it is today (hurts, costs a lot and I don't need it until I'm in pain) to where it should be in order to reflect the modern advances

in care that only we know about. The position might be: THE NEW DENTISTRY... beauty is healthy, healthy is beautiful.

An entire PR campaign could be constructed around this central theme which has as its goal to create a new identity for dentists and Dentistry.

What we want to communicate to these aging baby boomers (the largest segment of the buying population) is that if what they want is health and beauty, they simply can't ignore their teeth. It's a whole new dental world now, which is not only kinder and gentler, but has lots more to offer than the mere plugging of holes in your teeth until such time that you require dentures. No more spit bowls, horrible smells, sounds or excruciating pain. And, if you choose, no more metal. Instead, your teeth can look like they've never been touched by decay, aging, or ever repaired by a dentist.

Such a campaign could have the effect of making it very uncool to let the health and appearance of your teeth deteriorate, while at the same time making it popular and smart to take advantage of what Dentistry has to offer.

Such a campaign would also promote the idea that a person simply can't be considered successful, fit, handsome or beautiful unless their breath is fresh, their gums are healthy and their teeth unblemished, straight and white.

### **Supply and Demand**

The population of the US at this writing is about 270 million. All of them will need a dentist, even if it's simply to extract their bad teeth. There are about 140,000 dentists (excluding academicians and the military). What would happen if even a small percentage of the population changed their minds about Dentistry and decided they had better deal with their teeth? What if, using a well planned PR campaign, we could achieve a fifteen percent increase? This would mean nearly four million more patients than we already have now.

They would only have about 140,000 places they could go.

Do you want any of them?