

***Ask Them What They Want  
Tell Them They Can Get It from You  
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*By William Howard Horrocks*

It has been said that when Sigmund Freud was nearing the end of his career he admitted that in spite of all the mysteries and questions he had tried to solve in his life's work, the one thing he was never able to fully understand was, "what do women really want?"

**Maybe Sigmund should have done a survey.**

A survey can give you an incredible amount of useful information you can use in your marketing efforts. Surveys can help you hone your marketing message so you can zero in on what people think and feel about you, your practice, and dentistry in general as well as a host of other topics. They tell you the reasons people chose you over the dozens of other dentists they could have chosen. Surveys tell you what your marketing message should be.

It's not always practical to go out and survey the public at large, that is, people on the street. That being the case, how are you going to find out what marketing messages people will respond to?

You ask those who have *already* responded - your patients.

The idea is; the marketing message that got your current patients to arrive will work to get prospective new patients to arrive as well.

**Don't Assume You Know What People Want**

Without a survey you might end up telling people things they couldn't care less about. For example, a client of mine thought that because he had all this high tech equipment like an intra-oral camera, laser, air abrasion, etc. that people would just flood in because he was so "advanced." He wanted me to design mailings and other promotions that would highlight his "state-of-the-art" practice.

After surveying his patients I found out what they actually appreciated the most was that the doctor and staff were very friendly and treated them with warmth, courtesy and concern. They didn't really care that much about the camera and the other gadgets. So emphasizing the “cutting edge” aspect of his practice in his mailings and other promotions would have missed the mark and would have been an expensive waste.

### **Survey Secret**

What you are actually doing with a survey is a very simple thing, yet it seems that not even the big Madison Avenue ad agencies or marketing gurus fully grasp its simplicity. Here it is in a nutshell;

The way to strike a responsive chord in your audience is to ask them what they want, and then tell them they can get it from you.

Here are some examples (by the way these are real life examples from my own clients).

Dr. Smith wanted me to re-design her Yellow Pages ad for the new year. So we did a survey on her patients and asked them what qualities they would expect a good dentist to have. The most given answer was - “he/she must be experienced and up-to-date.”

We also asked what they would expect from the hygienists and other staff. The most given answer - “I want them to be friendly and caring.” We then used that information to craft a marketing message and came up with the headline, “Where Can You Get The Most Up-To-Date Dentistry From Friendly, Caring And Experienced Professionals?”

The rest of the ad was built around and highlighted these themes.

Here's another. Dr. John wanted to find out what it was about his practice that his patients found different. In other words, what made him stand out from all the other practices? The most given answer - (survey says!) “I'm treated like family - not a number.”

So the theme for the mailing we did to the residents in the neighborhood was, “We Treat Our Patients like Family.” And we included testimonial

quotes from patients that echoed this theme to really drive home the point.

Simple, isn't it? Ask them what they want, tell them they can get it from you.

### Common Themes

Getting the doctor and staff to survey their patients is always first thing I do with a new client. I write the survey and have the staff hand one to each arriving patient. The patient is asked to fill it out and return it to the covered box on the front desk. (Covered to ensure anonymity). I usually try to get 30 or so completed surveys, though the more the better. Consequently, I have the results of literally thousands of surveys on dental patients from all over the country.

Marketing messages often vary greatly from practice to practice but even so, some common themes have emerged. For example, four years ago there was a fairly high percentage of patients in this country who were worried about getting AIDS from their dentist. Perhaps a silly notion, but they were worried just the same. Therefore the marketing documents (ads, mailers, etc.) that I wrote for my clients at that time would always contain a line about "advanced patient protection procedures" or some such phrase. The degree we emphasized this depended on the percentage who were worried about it. If it were a high percentage we'd make "sterilization" the main theme of the ad or mailer, perhaps even constructing a headline stressing cleanliness. If the percentage was lower we might have simply included a mention of it. But now, four years later, I've found this concern has all but disappeared. It rarely comes up any more, or if it does it's a very small percentage. So the "sterilization" message is not as much of a concern right now. However, a 60 Minutes hatchet job could change all that. That's why it's important to survey regularly.

### What Do People Want From Dentistry?

Even though I encourage you to survey your own patient population to get their specific needs, desires and concerns, there are consistent themes that have emerged from the extensive surveying I've done. You can use these and be fairly certain that your message will not fall on deaf ears. The list

below contains what I've found to be the most desired features people want from their dental health professionals;

1. Friendliness from doctor and staff (invariably this is the number one desire and has been for years)
2. Caring, concern and understanding from doctor and staff
3. Gentle, stress-free, as-close-as-you-can-get-to-painless dental care (even though it's trite, they still want to hear that you will be gentle)
4. Convenient location (close to home, work or near where they go frequently, such as the shopping center)
5. Clean, modern, up-to-date office
6. Insurance acceptability (even if you don't accept assignment they want to know that you will at least help them file the paperwork)
7. Payment options (credit cards, pre-payment discount, Norwest, etc.)
8. Prompt emergency care (do you make it clear that emergencies are welcome or do you discourage them by saying "emergency care available."  
The word "available" makes it sound like you'll accept them but you really don't want to)
9. Good with their kids
10. Offers various cosmetic procedures such as whitening, bonding, veneers, non-mercury, tooth colored fillings

Notice that "technical expertise" or even "competence" aren't even on the list! Not that this is any reason to be sloppy or not do your best for your patients, but it is interesting that this is not a chief concern.

Note also that the top items on the list; friendliness, caring, concern and understanding, are human elements and have nothing whatever to do with crowns, bridges, root canals or expensive equipment. And not only that, these actions and attitudes don't cost you a thing yet they are the very best marketing you can do.

By regularly surveying you are asking your patients what they want. All you have to do is make sure you can deliver those things and then tell one and all they can get what they want right in your practice.

That's a message people will respond to.