

Why People Buy

And Why "Old" Patients are Better Than New Ones

by William Howard Horrocks

Even though what my dentist clients mostly want me to do is help them to get new patients, I always tell them the real gold in their practice lies in their existing patients. In fact the best income source immediately available to any practice is the patient files. Why is this?

To know why, you first have to answer this: Under what circumstances do people decide to part with their money? Many complicated theories have been put forth about this. For instance there's the "left brain/right brain," idea (or is it right brain/left brain? I forget.) This says that people buy either because of a logical well thought out trail of reason or they buy purely from emotion due to some hidden, unconscious process that nobody fully understands.

Other ideas include: people buy because the seller has been more persuasive, or has presented an offer with a clear and definite benefit, or has a better price, or knows what problems the prospect has and offers better solutions to these problems. Most of these have some validity.

But there's a much simpler explanation for what has to occur before people will buy. When I tell you what it is you will immediately recognize its truth and across-the-boards application to selling dentistry. This one idea is more to the heart of the matter and most importantly, more *usable*, than the others. (For example - tell me quick - how are you, right now, going to *use* the left brain/right brain theory to get more patients?)

Its workability is obvious and sweeping. It encompasses all other theories and explains any success or failure you may have had in selling dentistry to people. And it's only six words in length! Here it is:

No One Buys From a Stranger

How can this be true? Haven't we all ordered some gizmo from a magazine, not knowing who the heck was selling it? Yes of course, but let's take a closer look. Even if our only contact with the person or company we

purchased from was the ad we saw in the magazine, we must have felt some degree of familiarity or trust toward the seller. We had to have felt that what they were selling could help us and that they were not going to cheat us. If we hadn't felt this way, we wouldn't have sent the check, right?

How about new patients you've never seen before? Aren't you a complete stranger to them? Yet here they are in your chair. The answer is no, you aren't a total stranger. They saw your ad or letter or whatever marketing you used to attract them and something about your marketing told them you had their best interests at heart and you could do the best job. If this had not been communicated in some fashion they would have chosen another dentist, don't you think?

That's why referrals are usually the easiest and best patients to deal with. When your patient tells his or her friends about you, you're suddenly no longer a stranger. The person may not know you, but they are familiar with the person who refers them to you. People only buy if they know, trust, or are familiar with you, even if they gain this by extension through others.

And that's why your patient files are a gold mine. It's easier to sell something to someone if they already trust you, know you or have heard about you. Selling to strangers is more difficult because this familiarity factor is absent.

You have hundreds or thousands of patient files and these people know who you are because you've seen them at least once. If you gave them good service, they undoubtedly view you favorably. And not only that *you already know where they live*. You don't have to search (or buy mailing lists) for those who might be interested in your services.

Provided you've kept your list reasonably updated, here's what you possess: *the names and addresses of hundreds, even thousands, of people who are familiar with you, have a high regard for you and have already given you money*. In advertising that's what's known as a very hot mailing list!

What to Do With These "Old" Files

I'd say, "Call them," but I know for a variety reasons this will probably not get done. So do the next best thing by sending them a series of personal letters or postcards. Even if all you said was "Dear John, it's been a long time. Why don't you come in and let me check your teeth," you would get some calls. But be more creative by offering them something and thereby increasing your response. Like this: "I've decided any patient I haven't seen in a year should get a complete exam and x-rays. Call for an appointment before February 15th and it won't cost you anything. If everything's okay, I'll tell you. If you need work, you can decide if you want to do it now or later."

If you don't want to give anything away, then come up with some other offer. The point is, you have to give them a reason to call you and to call now.

You know, the advice I've given you is not new. You've heard it before, but how many dentists mail regularly to their patient base? I'm long ago over the shock of this. Out of my last 30 clients, maybe two did regular mailings (that is until I got hold of them). What I commonly see is the practice sends out a postcard usually only once, saying, "It's been six months since your last appointment." That's better than nothing, but how *dull*. Besides that doesn't give them enough reason to call you. And one letter or card isn't enough. Make them an offer (e.g. free or reduced fee exam, or whatever), state that it won't last forever so they should call now, and repeat it in two, three and four subsequent mailings.

Because no one buys from a stranger, canned cards and letters don't work as well. Make them personal letters and cards even though you may send the exact same letter to 400 people.

The Most Effective Marketing

The more your ads, mailers and newsletters make you familiar and friendly to your public, the better they will work. Then of course this friendliness has to carry over to how you treat them after they arrive. Superior, give-'em-way-more-than-they-expect customer service is by far your most effective marketing. It's also the cheapest!

My own agency's surveys of thousands of dental patients from all over the country completely confirm the following. *The public's perception of whether you're a "good dentist" or not revolves much more around you and your staff's personal demeanor and level of caring service than it does around any technical skill.*

They don't usually know if you did the root canal perfectly, but they always know if they trust and like you. And with your "old" patients you're already half-way there.