



Grow your practice by thinking *outside the chair*

by Marvin Greene, DDS

Nearly every general dentist reaches the comfort zone, the admirable position where his or her practice is running smoothly. However, beneath the surface there is often an undercurrent saying, “Things can be bigger and better.” You can make it happen, by small tweaks or major overhauls. It all begins with thinking creatively outside the chair — the one you see your patients in each day and the one you relax in each evening.

Applying some creative thinking outside the chair in five areas will help take you from the comfort zone to the next level. These areas include:

- ❶ Improve patient care
- ❷ Leverage patient relations
- ❸ Build referral networks
- ❹ Enhance staff management through humor
- ❺ Invest in technology

Improve patient care (paired with practice management)

First put yourself in the patients’ chair. Truly understand their fears, needs, and desires. Be very sensitive to their pain. Don’t allow your patients to wait, schedule appropriately. When unavoidable delays happen, take the time to explain why you are behind and apologize accordingly. Your patients’ time should be more important than your time.

Calling after a procedure to check on their well-being is always patient friendly. More importantly, problems can be recognized and dealt with earlier with a preemptive phone call. My partner and I, like many practitioners, give our cell phone numbers to many of our patients. We found that this is a huge practice-enhancer. Surprisingly, the calls that are generated are extremely small, especially since we make the first contact.

We need to return to the basics and “wow” our patients. This can occur on many fronts. Go the extra mile for your patients — they are the reason that we are in business. Put them on a pedestal and they will put you on one. Give a genuine 125 percent. Patients should feel that you are the best dentist in the world and that they are lucky to have you. Only then will they feel compelled to refer new patients to you and help your practice grow.

Practice-management skills are necessary to elevate one’s care. Many of these skills are learned through continuing education. Besides better patient care, exposure

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to scientific advances, business acumen, and increased marketability can be gained through continuing education.

In today's economy, we must use and incorporate new, sound business practices to succeed. Traditionally, much of dental school tutelage focused on clinical techniques and expertise. In a volatile and changing marketplace, this is not enough. In addition to practicing our craft to the highest and most professional level, we must excel on other fronts. We must also be a businessperson, psychologist, communicator, and healer. Continuing education can equip us with the needed tools to achieve these ends and more.

Practice-management seminars and marketing consultants can help us increase the bottom line. Communication skills, staff maximization and phone techniques are just three of the many benefits gained from practice management courses and consultants. Better communication results in better patient care, which results in happier patients and often, increased profit. Communication is our biggest ally in averting problems and litigation. Disgruntled patients are often those with whom we have not communicated appropriately, nor listened to their concerns adequately.

Our office has instituted new phone answering techniques as a result of a practice-management course. We are currently enrolled in an extensive, hands-on phone certification. The phone is the lifeblood, the hub of our business. Patients must be communicated with in an honest, open, caring, accommodating, and entrepreneurial way. Consistent office policies must be followed.

We have to serve, but we also need to increase our business in order to achieve "the bigger and better." Practice-management incorporation has been a great investment for our practice and a boost for improving patient care.

Leverage patient relations

When patient care is the paramount concern of the office, it becomes easy to leverage patient relations. Without a satisfied patient, there can be no successful leveraging. Each practitioner should make an individual plan as to how he or she could engender greater loyalty and generate more appreciation from the existing patient base. Our practice has turned our waiting room into a living room. We supply creature comforts such as refreshments and beverages. Our staff communicates with each patient as they would with family or close friends. The interactions need to be genuine and not forced. I recently saw Paul McCartney successfully



turn the United Center in Chicago into his living room. He had nearly 30,000 people, including me, think they were in his living room.

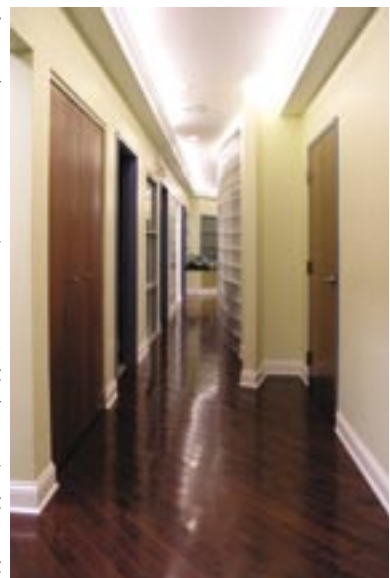
Sit in your own waiting room and see how you could improve it. Is your literature interesting, current, and well-presented? Does it reflect your personality and philosophy? Does your décor help to blow your own whistle? Is it clear to your patients how you feel about them? Do you illustrate how important they are to you? Do you show your patients evidence of your special training, education, procedures, and accomplishments? They need to see you in the best light, so don't be afraid to turn it on.

Asking for referrals is personal but important. Often, if you don't ask you don't receive. It has to be tailored to each dentist. This could be accomplished in many ways. It needs to be tactful, non-offensive, upbeat, and open. If one has the slightest trepidation, one should not ask for referrals.

Building referral networks with dental and medical specialists fosters a higher level of patient care, grows your business, and will help avoid potential problems. In the referral process, the ultimate winner should be the patient. Through quality referrals, a general dentist's relationship with his or her patient is reinforced. The patient sees that the quality of care is their dentist's top concern. It also creates freedom for the referring dentist to do more of what he or she is good at. This also eliminates the possibility of having an unexpected sequelae from doing an infrequent procedure.

Build referral networks

Referrals are made for various reasons, including getting a second opinion, dealing with the uncertainty of diagnosis and treatment, performing a complicated procedure, accessing cutting-edge technology, and/or helping a patient achieve increased form and function. Typical patients' concerns are peace of mind, minimum pain, the highest level of attention, and the least disruption to their lives. This equates to the treatment as well as to how the patients are handled by the referred office. Also important to patients is how quickly they can be seen. The care rendered to patients reflects on both the general dentist and the specialist. Therefore, a higher level of care is fostered.



Note: All office photos taken at Dr. Greene's practice, The Institute.

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The referral process works well when patients' expectations are met or exceeded. However, when patients are dissatisfied, the resulting negativity is far more detrimental. The problems that result from an unhappy patient are exponential rather than cumulative. If this unfortunate situation arises, it must be handled with the utmost diligence.

Undiagnosed and untreated periodontal disease is one of the leading causes of litigation for the general dentist. Many of these unfortunate situations could be averted with an early periodontal referral.

Enhance staff management through humor

Happiness and humor in the office enhances staff management. It also heightens creativity and usually results in exceptional patient care. You do not have to transform your practice into a comedy club, but recognize that the little things in human relations reap huge rewards. Small changes in attitude, cooperation, and respect can create major changes in your practice.

Content, happy staff members are much more likely to offer creative suggestions and ideas. An empowered staff is a more productive staff. People are more apt to believe in a happy, warm, and kind establishment, instead of a disinterested, unhappy, and threatening one.

There is significant data to support the benefits of humor. Dr. William Fry, psychiatrist humor researcher and former "Man of the Year" for The Association for Applied Therapeutic Humor, has reported many physical benefits of humor. Dr. Fry claims that laughter boosts cardiovascular fitness by increasing the respiratory response, as well as lowers blood pressure and heart rate. He and others have shown it reduces pain perception, stimulates circulation, and increases oxygen tension. The net effect is that you feel better.

Humor must be used with no sarcasm and extreme sensitivity. A doctor needs to be sincere, clear, and non-offensive at all times. Being light-hearted and friendly could be a valuable tool. As caregivers, each of us needs to strike a

balance between professionalism and being a human being.

I feel that happiness and humor go hand in hand to create awesome patient care. They enable individuals to feel better about themselves, which translates into many positives for everyone involved. Therefore, remember to lighten up around your staff and patients to create rewards for all.

Invest in technology

Investing in technology and buying state-of-the-art equipment can be one of the most satisfying practice enhancements to gain "the bigger and better." This is best accomplished through conducting an organized analysis. One needs to consider the financial implications, personal impact, effects on patient care, market value, and the intangibles afforded by the new technology.

The purchase of advanced equipment must make good economic sense. The economics of the purchase — how it is financed, tax ramifications and what you will need to recoup per use — must be carefully assessed. Time needs to be factored in since use tends to be less at the onset.

When considering any purchase, closely scrutinize your fees. Analyze your fees by procedures, location of your practice, and what other practitioners charge for similar procedures.

Accountants, sales representatives, insurance companies, and outside sources can all be instrumental in your analysis.

One of the biggest impacts on potential profitability is how you market it. Action plans need to be formulated to increase interest in the purchase. New purchases often enable the doctor to improve treatment planning and incorporate additional procedures. Sometimes the boost in confidence and competency helps the doctor perform more happily and profitably. This can be an excellent public relations opportunity for patients.

In conclusion, by utilizing creative thinking outside the chair, dentists can significantly grow their practices. This enables them to be more fulfilled and profitable. By achieving "the bigger and better," the ultimate winner will be the patient. **DE**

Marvin Greene, DDS, is a board-certified oral and maxillofacial surgeon. With his partner, David H. Hanson, DDS, MD, Dr. Greene co-founded The Lincoln Park Institute for Oral and Cosmetic Surgery in Chicago. He can be reached at (773) 327-2400, and at www.LPInstitute.com.

