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THE EDITOR'S CORNER

The Branded Experience

A friend whom I consider one of the most competent orthodontists anywhere once had a highly prosperous practice, but as time went on and competition increased, he lost more and more market share, until he hardly had a practice at all. He always felt his slightly-above-average fees caused the patient exodus, but a short conversation with any colleague would have revealed the truth—that he needlessly antagonized patients and parents with his abrupt, harsh, and unsympathetic manner.

Many offices pride themselves on efficiency, high-tech equipment, productivity, and profitability, but these remain the spokes of the wheel. The hub around which all the rest rotate is patient satisfaction. Richard Tyler, president of Tyler International Institute, surveyed American businesses to discover the causes of customer defections, and what he found applies to orthodontic practices as well:

- Most people stop trading with a company because of poor service. If you think service is equivalent to technical skills, think again. Service in a professional practice involves every feature of the experience—decor and comfort of the office, cleanliness of the bathrooms, courtesy on the telephone, attentiveness of the doctor and employees, helpfulness with appointments, and more. Patients seldom understand enough to evaluate clinical skills, but they have no trouble at all evaluating genuine friendliness, commitment to cleanliness, or common courtesy.
- Fully 90% of the defectors never say anything about why they decided to leave. They simply do not go back. Doctors should not rely on dissatisfied patients to volunteer information about deficits in the delivery of their services. A patient satisfaction survey takes some effort and expense, but it will often reveal what patients really think about a practice. I have made some significant changes in my own office based on what I have discovered from these surveys.
- The average dissatisfied customer will tell nine or 10 other people about the experience, whereas a satisfied

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customer will tell only five others.

- It takes about \$10 of new business to replace every \$1 of repeat business. In a competitive environment, maintaining satisfied patient families is far more efficient than bringing in new ones to replace them.
- Dissatisfaction with a service or product does not necessarily guarantee the loss of business if the problem is quickly and satisfactorily resolved. In fact, efficient, effective service recovery is often a way of turning problems into great marketing opportunities.

Patient satisfaction is not necessarily an either-or proposition, according to a Xerox customer study that was described in a 1995 *Harvard Business Review* article by Thomas Jones and E. Earl Sasser. When Xerox ranked satisfaction on a 1-to-5 scale, from completely dissatisfied to completely satisfied, the people who checked 4, though they claimed to be satisfied, were six times more likely to defect than the people who selected 5.

People tend to think that satisfaction and loyalty move together in tandem, but that is a fundamental error—particularly with a monopoly such as the U.S. Postal Service. Customers may remain “loyal” (actually, “attendant” is probably a better word) even as their satisfaction plummets. One strategy to keep customers attendant is to make it expensive or inconvenient to switch. Frequent-flier plans do this so well that few airlines even try to make flying a pleasant

experience anymore. But cranky, captive customers can cost you plenty while they plot their escape—as any teacher can tell you two weeks before school lets out—or after they finally defect and tell all their friends.

The kind of deep satisfaction that creates steadfast loyalty does not come from one big thing, whether it is the most beautiful, modern office in town, or cutting-edge computer technology, or a Madison Avenue marketing program. It comes from the totality of many small encounters with the orthodontic office. Making ordinary events carry a whiff of the wonderful is not easy, but orthodontists who want to do it should concern themselves with what the Forum Corporation of Boston calls a “branded customer experience”. That is, they should develop a service experience or “brand” that patients can expect and receive every time they come into the office.

The branded experience calls for orthodontists and their staffs to determine what they want to be known for, to develop services that patients can reliably expect, and to decide how they intend to delight patients every day. They may try to distinguish their offices by quality of treatment, and that is certainly commendable; but without an equal responsiveness to patients’ needs and expectations, plus a staff that exudes empathy and care, I am afraid their efforts toward excellence may bear the same bitter fruit my friend tasted.

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