



Skills for success: improving case acceptance by recognizing buying signals

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EVERY DENTIST WE'VE EVER MET WORKS TO IMPROVE HIS OR HER CLINICAL SKILLS virtually every day.

They read journals, learn from colleagues, take continuing-education courses, and immerse themselves in specialty groups. They want to stay at the top of their professional game. With many years of education and training to become a dentist — and ongoing enhancement of clinical skills in daily practice — we have yet to hear anyone tell us he or she went into practice to be a “salesman.”

Not everyone is comfortable with the idea of selling, but in elective care it may be called *case acceptance*. Many dentists become comfortable with the process of identifying and solving people's problems — helping them discover value in what the practice can provide for them. That is sales. It's a five-letter word that has a better and more acceptable definition over the negative images of old: *Selling is serving; bringing a solution to a person with a need.* Dentists — who see themselves as doing good for people — are more comfortable with this definition. And doing this successfully requires a personal style that helps patients achieve what they want.

We also know a lot of successful practitioners who are excellent communicators. They build rapport, speak well, and listen well. Much like their clinical skills, listening takes practice. Empathetic listening is a process that improves mutual understanding. This is an individual skill that deserves regular attention. At least half (if not more) of successful case acceptance is based on listening and understanding what is being said, while looking for the meaning that may be between the lines.

Look for these buying signals ...

Both the dentist and staff can, with practice, recognize signals that indicate the patient may be ready to accept professional treatment recommendations. Keep in mind that patients don't think in terms of “treatment” or “procedures,” which may be the means to an end. In their value system, the “end game” is highly personal and leads to some greater degree of happiness. They're thinking “pain relief” or “brighter smile” or “personal confidence.” Buying signals can be subtle, but also revealing. Common buying signals include:

◆ **Being “possessive.”** Questions or statements with “I” or “my” may signal that patients are thinking about the

positive results as if they already have them. Comments like this are an expression of at least conditional acceptance.

◆ **Repeating questions and asking for details.** Questions signal interest, and questions about details indicate understanding. Repeating a question confirms a detail that is probably important to a patient's acceptance; he/she may be seeking confirmation of what is heard.

◆ **Looking for validation or confirmation.** The individual may have already decided, but wants agreement and/or encouragement from a spouse. (*It's often best to talk with all concerned from the outset.*) Asking a spouse or some other “higher authority” can also be a means to defer the decision.

◆ **Sounds of affirmation or agreement.** When someone adds a positive comment with feeling, he or she may be enthusiastic about the benefits. These are comments that presuppose the patient has mentally taken ownership of the benefits.

◆ **Asking about implementation steps.** The length of time to complete or impact the patient's routine means he/she is thinking about the process itself. As a condition to final acceptance, the patient may be judging how long it will be before benefits are achieved (or how to adjust the time away from work, etc.).

◆ **Comments or questions (or negotiation) about price.** Generally this is a good signal, but patients should hear and understand the value and benefits, not just the cost.

Know when to ask ...

The most important buying signal is when the patient agrees to your recommendations. But surprisingly, many practitioners simply fail to ask. So, listen for understanding and when the dialogue signals a mutual understanding, ask for the commitment. In the ordinary course of a week, the typical dentist will have hundreds of opportunities to improve these interpersonal communication skills. Building on this process is an important skill for success. **DE**

Stewart Gandolf, MBA, and Lonnie Hirsch are cofounders of Healthcare Success Strategies, and two of America's most experienced practice marketers. They have worked with dentists for a combined 30 years, have written numerous articles on practice marketing, and have consulted with more than 3,000 private health-care practices. They may be reached by calling (888) 679-0050, through their Web site at www.healthcaresuccess.com, or via e-mail at info@healthcaresuccess.com.