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Selling Dentistry so it doesn't feel like Selling Dentistry

“The best selling is serving”

A Peer-Reviewed Publication
Written by Janet Hagerman, RDH, BSDH

Abstract

Nothing in dentistry creates more controversy than the concept of “selling” dentistry, yet being adept at selling and persuading is a critical skill in dentistry. How can you sell without feeling like you’re selling? Regardless of your profession, hobby or personal connections you are always selling something through relationships and service. How good are you at it?

What’s wrong with selling dentistry? If a practice is not profitable it cannot exist, let alone succeed. Dental practices are a combination of clinical protocols for best patient care with best business principles to be as profitable as possible. The two are not mutually exclusive; indeed they are interdependent. So why not examine solid, ethical sales strategies and apply them to dentistry? The fact is we all like to buy; we just hate to be sold. The good news is that selling is a learned skill, so anyone can become better.

This course will provide strategies to increase case acceptance (sales) boost production (and profits), while enhancing patient care. Learn the true meaning of selling, and how to manage this concept in an elegant, non-intimidating manner that creates value for your patients, and makes you feel great about what you have to offer.

Educational Objectives:

At the conclusion of this educational activity participants will be able to:

1. Utilize the *Values Questions* to discover patient needs
2. Utilize the *Treatment Triad* to prioritize treatment
3. Increase patient treatment case acceptance

Author Profile

Janet Hagerman, RDH, BSDH, is an international author and speaker, PennWell advisory board member and coach. A graduate of the Medical College of Georgia, with over 20 years of dental experience coaching private and group practices, Janet’s focus on communication and leadership empowers health professionals nationwide. Her articles are published in numerous dental journals. Janet is the author of the upcoming book *Selling Dentistry-Ethically and Effectively*. Contact Janet at janet@janethagerman.com or www.janethagerman.com

Author Disclosure

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What’s wrong with selling dentistry? If a practice is not profitable it cannot exist, let alone succeed. Dental practices are a combination of clinical protocols for best patient care with best business principles to be as profitable as possible. The two are not mutually exclusive; indeed they are interdependent. So why not examine solid, ethical sales strategies and apply them to dentistry? The fact is we all like to buy; we just hate to be sold. The good news is that selling is a learned skill, so anyone can become better.

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Doctor: “I wish my team would sell more dentistry!”

Staff: “I’m a health care provider. I hate sounding like a used car salesman!”

Dilemma: Why is selling dentistry so controversial?

We tend to pigeonhole people in categories of “sales people” and “non-sales people.” Actually, we are all in sales. We spend our lives selling (thoughts, concepts, items and ideas) and persuading. Everyone is in the business of selling. The only question is – how good are you at it?¹ Being good at selling and persuading is a critical skill regardless of your business, dentistry included.

Selling dentistry has gotten a bad reputation. Too often it is associated with negative connotations and an assumed lack of clinical care, but nothing can be further from the truth. As a clinician, you, and your team MUST learn to sell your services and products or you will not be successful. If you don’t someone else will. Patients are educated, well informed consumers, and will continue to become more knowledgeable. Information comes from many sources, some more reliable than others, including advertising, internet, retail stores, friends, family, and other dental practices. The information deluge is overwhelming. Patients need a reliable advocate to

sort through what they hear about dentistry. They need you, their health care professional, the expert, to inform, guide, direct and responsibly persuade.

Dental professionals are often reluctant to embrace, even acknowledge, the concept of selling dentistry, preferring words instead like prescribe, enroll, recommend, inform and educate. These are all noble goals but they miss the most important element which constitutes a sale; when the consumer/patient says “YES!” – “yes I’ll take it.” Historically dental professionals have focused on patient education. While educating is important, the end result of acceptance is crucial, and simply educating does not always accomplish acceptance. In fact, too much education can have the opposite effect of confusing and overwhelming patients to the point of turning them away (e.g. “I’ll think about it.”) Simply stated, selling is defined as “To exchange goods or services for money or its equivalent.”² There is nothing inherently good or bad about selling unless you make it so. The objective then is to find the best sales strategies that serve the consumer/patient in a helpful and productive manner and apply them to dentistry to boost acceptance of services, while always maintaining the highest clinical standards.

Most importantly, as this course examines BEST selling strategies, the assumption will be to always support the BEST clinically based patient care. The selling and communication strategies will always be layered upon a foundation of sound clinically based protocols that are in the patient’s best medical and dental interest. Selling strategies simply aid in getting clinical needs accomplished.

“The Best Selling is Serving”

Gratify a desire • Satisfy a need

“Given the chance, people will buy from people who care.”³ This is not just optimistic thinking but the conclusion of studies conducted by Paco Underhill, who has made his life’s work the study of how and why people buy. How do your patients know you care? Patient care, like customer care, is expressed on many different levels. Great care usually involves exceeding customer expectations with unexpected thoughtfulness. In dentistry, patient care is a process that encompasses the total patient experience in your office. Your office must convey an atmosphere that lets patients not just know, but feel that you are their advocate and that you truly care.

An attitude of service results in being a true advocate for patient care. Your patients don’t really know if your dentistry is excellent. Patients do not know if your crown margins are smooth, or if you placed a bridge on a faulty periodontal foundation. What your patients DO know is how they FEEL in your office. Did you solve their dental problem? Are they kept waiting? Are they addressed by their name? Does your service HURT them? Is it difficult or easy for them to discuss fees with your team? Do they feel good

about coming back? Do they keep their appointments? Do they refer their friends? These are the qualities that cultivate patient loyalty and trust, and promote case acceptance.

Focused Communication versus Casual Conversation

Sales experts say, "Take time with people and they become loyal, lifetime customers, not just a sale."⁴ This may be true but it is also challenging advice given the time constraints of dental practices. It is imperative to make excellent use of your time and leverage every minute of patient communication. This is called Focused Communication versus Casual Conversation. Casual conversation is the social chit-chat you enjoy that takes your patient relationships from clinical to personally meaningful. You want meaningful patient relationships that create strong foundations of trust and ensure patient retention and loyalty. The problem occurs when well intentioned chit-chat gobbles up your precious clinical time. (e.g. "I just don't have time for an oral cancer screening.")

Focused communication resolves this dilemma because it enables you to manage your conversations productively. It provides you with important patient information to use when developing a customized treatment presentation. Through Focused Communication and The Discovery Process you can learn to become razor sharp in your presentation delivery while still ensuring comfort for you and your patient. In fact, you will become more comfortable because you will be prepared.

Information Dosage

Good selling means giving your patient enough information to make a well informed decision. The key word here is "enough." Enough information for one person may be too much for another, and still not enough for yet another. Dental health care providers know the clinical information but need a way to dispense this information appropriately. Too often patients get an overdose of education resulting in feelings of confusion and overwhelm, commonly leading to non-compliance. Different patients require different dosages of information in order to make informed decisions. Your job is to determine each particular patient's "information dosage." The Discovery Process will enable you to do this. In fact, an effective script to use to introduce treatment presentations is: "Ms Jones, I want to give you enough information for you to make a well informed decision."

The Discovery Process

It is imperative to customize the information dosage you dispense to match the needs and values of your patients. The best way to discover this is by asking open ended questions to learn about your patients' personal and emotional needs and values. You will, of course, learn their clinical needs via your clinical evaluations. Through the Discovery Process of question and answers, you will quickly understand how to customize the information dosage.

Values Questions

Values Questions are designed to do just that; discover a person's values. It's important that values questions are open ended, requiring a thinking response, not merely a yes or no response. These two questions will enable you to pinpoint your patient's dental values.

What is most important to you about your teeth? Answers will vary (whiter, straighter, stronger, keep them all, don't hurt) but most will fall into one of two categories: cosmetic or functional. Once you know your patient's preference you can customize your treatment presentation to appeal to this value.

What is most important to you about your dentist (dental office)? Most answers to this question (nice staff, don't hurt me, see me on time, take my insurance) will fall into one of three categories: time, pain, money. Once you know your patient's hot button, you will be far more successful when you speak to the values that are the most important to them.

You may have the exact same clinical treatment to present (for example a crown and three fillings) but you can present this many different ways depending on the patient's values. For example:

"Mrs. Jones, the crown and fillings you need can all be done in one visit to make the best use of your time since you travel so much. Also, the dental materials we now use are so natural and life like. I think you'll appreciate getting rid of those old metal fillings, replacing them with tooth colored fillings and a perfectly natural looking crown. You'll love the way your new smile will look!" (Values: time & cosmetic)

"Mr. Jones, the crown and fillings you need are going to strengthen your teeth. I know you said you want to keep your teeth and we want to support you in that goal. Those old metal fillings are breaking down and leaking, subjecting them to further decay. The new fillings will bond with your teeth making them stronger. And the crown you need will cover the whole tooth to protect it. This is the best treatment to ensure you keep your teeth for your lifetime." (Value: function)

Mrs. Jones, the crown and fillings you need are not surprising considering the time it's been since your last dental visit. I remember you said you hate dental work and have avoided it from fear of pain, and you are also concerned about insurance coverage for all your dental work. I know exactly how you feel because most of our patients have similar concerns. I'm not sure what your coverage will be since all plans vary (and there are hundreds of them) but I can assure you that Sue, our office manager/treatment coordinator is an expert at maximizing dental benefits for our patients. Our office is dedicated to finding ways to make your dentistry affordable. Plus, we specialize in fearful patients! Once we complete your immediate work we will show you how to prevent future problems. And you will love our doctor's gentle touch." (Values: pain & money)

These examples all address the same clinical need, but are presented differently based on the patient's values. When patients want more detailed clinical information they will ask for it. What most patients really want is to have their values acknowledged and addressed.

Dental Boot Kamp founder Walter Hailey said, "If You Want To Sell- Ask Don't Tell."⁵ As a dental professional, it is easy to get caught up with telling in the name of patient education. Try asking instead. By asking good open ended questions, your patients will give you all the information you need to customize your treatment plans and maximize treatment acceptance.

Dale Carnegie, who became famous for the interpersonal skills he developed and taught, said that it is "better to be interested than interesting." Being interested in a person requires that you ask and not tell. By asking questions and becoming interested in each patient's wants and needs, you become their advocate, ensuring a foundation of trust that is imperative for treatment plan acceptance. Values questions take very little time and reveal impactful information about your patient's values and hot buttons. This will enable you to gauge your patient's information dosage to customize their treatment presentation, and thus increase the likelihood of acceptance.

Treatment Triad

Once you've identified your patient values and moved on to a clinical evaluation, it's time to share your findings with your patient. This can be overwhelming if you have discovered a lot of treatment needs. The best way to handle treatment overwhelm is with the Treatment Triad. This involves prioritizing treatment into three categories: 1) urgent/immediate, 2) preventive/future planned, 3) cosmetic/unnecessary yet fun to explore. Prioritizing treatment lets patients know: 1) you can treat their immediate concern now, 2) you are an advocate for their future and maintenance dental needs and will work with them on a schedule that fits their life (and their budget), 3) you're creative and can offer them "fun" dentistry as a bonus. Now that you know their values, you can merge this with the clinical findings. Patients are much more likely to accept complete treatment when you can incorporate it into a prioritized comprehensive care plan that accounts for their life concerns. Utilize the Treatment Triad for every clinical evaluation.

Buyer's Remorse – prevent it

Even the best buying decisions sometimes result in buyer's remorse. "Wow, did I really spend all that money on a car/new shoes/a crown?" It's only natural to reflect back, wondering if you made the right decision. Help your patients KNOW that they did indeed make the right decision. Tell them how great that crown looks. Let them know how much better their new fillings will serve them. Tell them what great work your dentist does and how proud you are to be part of the team. Your patients will appreciate being part of that dental family. Be sure to call patients after major treatment and anesthesia including

SRP therapy to ensure their comfort and reinforce treatment success. For large cases treat your patient to a gift, and for smile design offer a professional photograph highlighting their new smile. People like to be associated with winners. Let your office shine in the eyes of your patients. Prevent buyer's remorse by turning your patients into raving fans.

Relationships Rule

Selling dentistry with care and integrity is serving your patients at the highest level. It is establishing and maintaining patient relationships that bloom into trust and loyalty and referrals.

"People don't care how much you know till they know how much you care."⁶ Patients will know how much you care when you:

- Focus your communication
- Understand and ask good open ended values questions
- Discover patient concerns and values
- Customize their information dosage
- Understand and use the Treatment Triad
- Be their advocate

Feel great about what you have to offer your patients. Take the stigma out of selling and give it the passion and attention it deserves. Once you truly own the passion you have for what you do, the sales process becomes simply a natural course of helping others to make the best choices for themselves.

When it comes to selling dentistry, relationships rule and ultimately the best selling is serving.

References

1. Brian Tracy, Psychology of Selling
2. Webster's II New Riverside dictionary
3. Paco Underhill, Why We Buy
4. Walter Liederman, owner Underwood HiFi
5. Walter Hailey, founder Dental Boot Kamp
6. John Maxwell, leadership expert, author

Author Profile



Janet Hagerman, RDH, BSDH, is an international author and speaker, PennWell advisory board member and coach. A graduate of the Medical College of Georgia, with over 20 years of dental experience coaching private and group practices, Janet's focus on communication and leadership empowers health professionals nationwide. Her articles are published in numerous dental journals. Janet is the author of the upcoming book Selling Dentistry-Ethically and Effectively. Contact Janet at janet@janethagerman.com or www.janethagerman.com

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Educational Objectives

- Utilize the Values Questions to discover patient needs
- Utilize the Treatment Triad to prioritize treatment
- Increase patient treatment case acceptance

Course Evaluation

1. Were the individual course objectives met? Objective #1: Yes No
 Objective #2: Yes No
 Objective #3: Yes No

Please evaluate this course by responding to the following statements, using a scale of Excellent=5 to Poor=0.

- | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-----|---|----|---|---|
| 2. To what extent were the course objectives accomplished overall? | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 3. Please rate your personal mastery of the course objectives. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 4. How would you rate the objectives and educational methods? | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 5. How do you rate the author's grasp of the topic? | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 6. Please rate the instructor's effectiveness. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
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| 8. Please rate the usefulness and clinical applicability of this course. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
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| 10. Do you feel that the references were adequate? | | Yes | | No | | |
| 11. Would you participate in a similar program on a different topic? | | Yes | | No | | |
| 12. If any of the continuing education questions were unclear or ambiguous, please list them. | _____ | | | | | |

13. Was there any subject matter you found confusing? Please describe.

14. How long did it take you to complete this course?

15. What additional continuing dental education topics would you like to see?

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