

## Smiles, Faces, and Straight Teeth

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When someone comes into your office, is this your chance to educate them on why they should want the best possible smile, face, or straight teeth? Some might think so and devote their marketing effort toward demonstrating the merits of those qualities.

If you talk with a marketing consultant, however, you would probably find that that is not the case at all. The truth is that most people come to your office already sold on the merits of these attributes. They came to see you to learn about what is involved in obtaining them. The fact is that we are selling trust in our services, and this means we are selling ourselves.

While at the airport the other day, I bought a book, which I found worthy of note. The book is called "Selling the Invisible" and is by Harry Beckwith. This book is directed at how goods and services are marketed in this country—the forces to which we (including our patients) are all subjected today. Beckwith begins by telling us that today three out of four Americans work in service companies and that by 2005, this number will be eight in ten. Where we used to identify ourselves by products produced, today's product is service, and he says, "service marketing is not product marketing." He's right! We tend to select products by their merits, their tangible substance. Services are selected and evaluated almost entirely on trust and faith.

If I needed an attorney, I might ask a close friend or even another attorney for their opinion. This would provide me with an anecdotal idea of how that person liked a particular attorney. But there is no information I can collect that will permit me to know in advance how well that attorney will solve my legal problem. Engaging an attorney is clearly a matter of how well I like the person and how much trust I developed in talking with that person.

It isn't a lot different when you buy a product like a car. We are all busy and our time is valuable. I go to the dealer already sold on buying a new car and likely even biased toward the goodness of that brand of car. If the dealer shows me what is under the hood, I nod appreciatively, even if I am not even remotely knowledgeable as to what

the jargon means. What really happens is that if I like the way I was treated and if I developed trust in the dealer, I buy.

In either of these vignettes, all that can really happen is for the lawyer or the car dealer to fail to sell themselves to me. Services and, from a consumer's standpoint, the goodness of many products are intangible and, at best, can only be evaluated superficially in advance of their purchase. What we are evaluating is the seller and how much trust we feel we can put in that person to deliver the services or goods in the way that we expect. I don't have to think hard to remember experiences where I owned product X, and when product X didn't live up to my expectations or the trust I had placed in it, I tried product Y. This is product Y's chance to capture me, and if it exceeds my expectations, I become an ardent and vocal enthusiast for product Y. The arcane books on marketing today don't tell you to meet the expectations of the consumer; they tell you to exceed them.

You can see where I am going with this. Orthodontics is clearly a service that cannot be evaluated in advance of its purchase. What we sell is a service, and that means we are selling ourselves. Orthodontics is not all that different from most purchases people make except that our product is very personal, and that makes it an even tougher consumer decision. The people who enter your office already want the best smiles, faces, and straight teeth. They are there to try to develop enough trust in you to commission you to give their child, or maybe even themselves, the best possible outcome.

Practice management people market a variety of slants on how to succeed, but they all are saying the same thing. There is a reason why some variation of the Golden Rule exists in almost all religions and philosophies. When you are a consumer, you want to be treated nicely and you are impressed by anyone who goes beyond the call of duty—precisely what your prospective patients want. The relationships you build and the quality of the service you deliver will last long after the cost is forgotten.