



Why Patients Don't Accept the Treatment They Need and What You Can Do About It

I have yet to speak with a dentist who doesn't tell me sooner or later that one of the biggest frustrations in dentistry is patients who really need treatment yet fail to accept recommendations or fail to follow through as agreed. Why does this happen? How can people, many of who could easily afford treatment, walk around knowing they need dentistry yet do nothing about it. In order to get a clear idea of why they don't accept your recommendation, let's look at why they would accept treatment.

Patients who accept, pay for and follow through with treatment feel the dentistry will create satisfaction or happiness in their lives. In other words, they figure out what's in it for them. The three areas patients feel dentistry can benefit them are: healthier teeth, teeth that look better (esthetics) and more comfortable teeth and gums.

These are the same reasons we diagnose and treat patients. So, what keeps some of them from accepting treatment? Here are three barriers or hurdles, that fortunately, we can remove starting tomorrow. One barrier for the patient is, "Nothing is bothering me, I'm doing fine, I don't have any problems." Yet you look in their mouths and you see perio, implants, partials, crown & bridge, etc. What gives? How can they not realize their "problems"? If you think back, we created this one. You or your hygienist asks, "Are you having any problems?" or "Is anything bothering you?" at the start of each recall visit. When the patient says, "No, no problems." you're dead! They have just let you know everything is okay in their minds. Now if you look in their mouths and find problems, perio, restoration etc. you have the unenviable task of trying to talk them into treatment they've already told you they don't need. These questions are the kiss of death to case acceptance. Stop asking them. Develop other questions that focus on what the patient wants (benefits for them) rather than any known problems they may have as we have in the past.

The next barrier for the patient is: You are the third dentist who has told them what they need and what problems to expect if not treated, and still they're in no hurry. Why? Because someone else told them that if they didn't receive the treatment they'd lose their teeth or have to have a root canal, and that was six years ago and everything is still okay. Once they figure out that they don't need it unless they perceive a problem, trying to tell them they do need it now doesn't work. Instead focus out 10 to 20 years from now. Look and see what they want long-term and then help them to get a long-term result that they want.

Another hurdle is they can't afford the treatment. Yes, that's right. The patient just drove up in the new Dodge Ram pick up truck with all the goodies (must have cost \$30,000) and can't afford your \$3,000 treatment plan. And you can't understand. Guess what, if car dealers sold cars like dentists present dentistry, they would be disappointed too. The dealership would have to remove all cars from the lot and from the showroom floor. The dealers would take a look at the car you drove to the lot. They'd see how well you took care of it and if possible fix your car up. This way you could get a few more miles out of it or they would watch it (sound familiar) until you ended up stranded on Alligator Alley on Friday night and the "service department" doesn't open until Monday at 7am bright and early. If your car were on its last legs, they'd size you up and offer the vehicle the dealer thought would fill your needs and fit your pocketbook. They would do a great job describing how the car was made (step by step) and what high quality materials had been used (only the best for you). Then the dealer would ask you, "Do you have any



questions" or " Do you understand"? You'd say no because if you didn't get it the first time, you don't want to hear it a second time or possibly were confused enough the first time around and are smart enough to know when to be silent. If you could work with their payment plan, then you chose between either walking to work or driving (that didn't take long), you'd sign up for a new car. After you'd signed the contract or paid your money, they'd show you what they'd picked out for you. If not, you'd tell them, "Let me think about it; I'll call you next week". Next week would come and go and that would be the last time they'd see you unless there was a problem. I've heard that one too, how quickly they forget.

Now I don't know about you but I'd rather see what I'm buying (the end result, benefits and features I want - emotional based) rather than have someone else describe to me what I'm getting (the step by step process - logic based). Because we dentists love the process, we present the process and tell them that's what they need. That's the hurdle - they don't always want to buy what they need, but they will buy what they want. Here's the solution. Let them see what's possible, what benefits they will receive, what's in it for them. Let them visualize for themselves. Show them pictures of what you can do after you find out what they want; remember - health, aesthetics and comfort. Come up with a simple consistent way to ask the patient what they want long-term; what are their long-term dental goals? Use photos. Help them create as much value for the dentistry you offer as the car dealer created for the vehicle they drove to your office. Stop being problem or crisis focused, find out what they want long term and have ways available to fit it into their budgets, so they can do the treatment that will last and not leave them stranded.