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If Your Practice Were an Amusement Park ... Why Should I Buy a Ticket?

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by Bob Frazer Jr, DDS, with Nido Qubein, MBA

Now that is a strange title for an article! But is it really? Let us ask you a question. What is the number one amusement park in America ... or, for that matter, the world? If you answered Disney World, you are absolutely correct! Now let's ask you another question. What is the number two amusement park in the world? Right again if you answered one of the other Disney parks. So, why do you suppose that is true?

In this article, we are going to explore why this is so and share seven secrets you can use to uniquely position your practice in the mind of your patients so that, like Disney, you can distance yourself from the competition. You will learn Disney's and other highly successful service providers' secrets ... how to be transformational, not simply transactional with your patients.

How can we make this claim? Both of us have done this more than once. First, we did it in a comprehensive, health-centered, insurance-independent, highest-quality dental practice and a world-class consulting firm, Creative Services, Inc. We are doing it again with our dental strategic-planning and coaching firm, R.L. Frazer and Associates, Inc. Our clients achieve top 5 percent status and report a new profound sense of personal significance, prosperity, and well-being.

During the last year, my co-author, Nido Qubein, president of High Point University (HPU), reports that we are transforming an 83-year-old institution with a rich history and a purposeful legacy into one of the finest universities in the country. We are investing \$100 million in three years to build 10 new buildings, renovate 11 others, and enhance academic programs and student life. We know that the magic is in the mix, and we are creating a magnificent point of connection with our students by creating wow moments at every turn. For example:

1. We have appointed a full-time Director of WOW to first get rid of all the "unWOWs" on campus and then create WOW moments.
2. We added live music in the cafeteria every day (professional groups) to model the value of fellowship. Students stay there longer, visit, and now faculty members come to the cafeteria and join them.
3. We bought an ice cream truck which is driven through campus to deliver free ice cream. This models the value of joy.
4. Free food and drinks are delivered from kiosks throughout the campus between classes. They model the value of generosity.

The strategy is working: Faculty are invested and supportive and students are flocking to HPU and staying. Our retention is up to 90 percent and this year's freshman class was up 31 percent. The number of campus visitors year-to-date is 70 percent higher than last year, and every other statistic is equally impressive, including raising almost \$70 million toward our plan without an official campaign.

What is happening at HPU is simple: Create a place where people feel connected and satisfied and they'll come, stay, and bring their friends. Before we break our arms patting ourselves on the back, let's focus on how these proven principles can help you and your practice to the top.

Start with positioning

Let's first discuss what we mean by positioning. Positioning is creating and maintaining precisely the right perceptions in the minds of people who can buy our professional services. It's actively seeking to shape the perceptions of our clients and prospective clients about what we do and how we do it.

Now let's apply this to a visit to Disney World. We're not sure if everyone reading this has visited one of the Disney amusement parks, but our hunch is most have and probably more than once. When you visited Disney, did you ride the rides? Probably so, but is it the rides that you remember the most? Our bet is that you most remember the experience of being warmly welcomed to a unique small-town atmosphere, coupled with an adventure ... and not just any adventure, but a heroic adventure that is also fun and childlike. As you experience Robinson Crusoe's Tree House, Space Mountain, or the Pirates of the Caribbean to the backdrop of carefully selected music, you are transformed, if only for a few minutes.

When you returned home, it was not the rides that were most memorable and important. Although brilliantly designed and choreographed, the rides by themselves are transactions with a beginning and an end. At Disney, they are the souvenirs of the experience. If you simply wanted to ride rides, you could find many places around the country from Six Flags to the traveling carnivals set up in shopping center parking lots ... and ride for a lot less money.

When an amusement park, a consultant or a dentist is merely transactional, they are very common with little or no strategic advantage. And what they provide will generally be chosen based on the lowest common denominator ... the fee! Fee (price) is always set by the seller (provider), yet value is always determined by the buyer. Does Disney charge more than most amusement parks? Of course they do, and we gladly pay it because we value what they offer. Sadly, the overwhelming majority of dental practices in the U.S. are transactional, serving people's needs through services like prophylaxis, sealants, composite restorations, root planings, crowns, root canals, implants, inlays/onlays, bridges, etc. These are really the souvenirs or hardware of what we do. Our patients do not really want these products or services.

The seven secrets

So here is secret number one - Nobody wants to buy your services or products. They want to buy the product of your product or service. What they are buying are the benefits. This is one reason cosmetics have become such a major trend ... our patients arrive knowing they want whiter teeth and a more attractive smile. Yes, we had to advance our technology to a point where we could bond esthetic porcelain veneers to teeth and learn to recontour gingival tissues, but no one really wants either of those procedures ... they want the beauty and youthful appearance that those services provide.

What Disney understands is that you go there for the experience and the experience they provide is transformational ... a memory for a lifetime. This is the second secret - the magic is in how good you and your team make people feel when they do business with you. That begins when the new patient first calls your office. Is it a wow experience? Are they greeted with a genuinely warm, smiling voice and a welcome that is both professional and helpful?

A few years ago, I spoke at one of the Disney properties and had occasion to call ahead. The experience was everything it should be. During the short hold, the song, "It's a Small World After All," was played and brought a smile to my face. The people at Disney understand that the brand is a promise of a guaranteed experience.

That is the third secret - We must brand ourselves and our practice and then deliver every time. Only when we can consistently deliver on our promise will we meet the expectations of today's demanding, quality-conscious patient.

This leads to two important questions for you to ponder, first privately and then during your next team meeting: What do we do better than any other dentist and dental practice in our community? Said another way, what does our "amusement park" offer? What we are searching for here is actually the fourth secret: The depth and width of your value (brand) to your patients/clients is portrayed by the menu of transformational services you offer.

My dental practice in Austin, Tex., offered a truly memorable new patient experience on one of five different levels of entry geared to where the patient was with his or her current needs and wants. Our levels ranged from:

Level 1 - Urgency: Patients with an emergency (usually marked by a great deal of pain) who wanted immediate relief from the pain.

Level 2 - Cursory: Patients entering through hygiene for the more traditional "cleaning and exam," but who would accept an invitation to move up in the context of what is important to them.

Level 3 - Self-Care: Patients who placed a value on having their teeth for a lifetime, but who wanted to proceed slowly.

Level 4 - Complete Dentistry: Patients who wanted to retain their teeth for a lifetime, but knew they had problems and wanted to correct these problems soon.

Level 5 - Wellness Resource: Patients who wanted a lifetime of good dental health, but needed help finding health-care providers to address other health issues that affected their total health.

The Level 3 through 5 patients received special personal attention from a staff member we call a "Health Relationship Coordinator." This person served as their personal lay consultant, case worker, and concierge, guiding them through a wow new-patient experience and a collaborative, comprehensive examination.

Physician and author, Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, said in a recent PBS series titled "The New Medicine," that patients should "choose a doctor who makes you feel smart and empowered, not one who makes you feel passive and dumb." That's how we wanted our patients to feel.

None of us receives a second chance to make a good first impression. At High Point University, we have created "Kodak moments," where students and their families come to visit and stay ... and invest in wonderful memories on our campus.

What we are saying is that you are positioned by what your patients and potential patients think about you and your practice. **Secret number five is - It is not what you can do for your patients, it is what they believe you can do for them** - how well they understand and value what you are offering. This ties directly to **secret number six - We must be interpreters of value for our patients.** It is essential that we help the patient understand the benefits of what we offer. A fair fee could be defined as:

When value is perceived, the fee is truly secondary. When value is not perceived, no amount of rationalizing will convince people it is appropriate. So, you and your team members must always listen intently for what your patients want and value. Listen especially for what your patients consider their big problems. These often are recurrent problems they have struggled with for many years. Then, once you understand their problems, collaboratively examine and create a treatment plan to help them see the benefits of the services you are offering. This leads to theseventh secret - As service providers, our worth is determined by the size of the problem(s) we can solve for our patients.

The entire experience in your practice must build value. One of our clients, Dr. Mark Cook of Carbondale, Colo., provides his patients with a "Comfort Menu" that they can choose from before commencing treatment. A staff member greets each patient. She then asks if they would enjoy having a paraffin bath treatment on their hands. They are introduced to the comfort menu - a laminated list of services Dr. Cook provides to make their visit more enjoyable.

Nitrous is discussed and started if desired, protective eyewear is placed, a pleasant-tasting, profound topical anesthetic is given, and then the patient is offered headphones. A bite block is provided during treatment. At the end of the appointment, a staff member brings in a warm towel for the patient, and asks for feedback concerning how well the dental team did in making the patient's visit as comfortable as possible. A follow-up call is made that evening to see how the patient is doing and to make sure there are no problems.

It is not what you think you can do that counts ... it's what our patients perceive and act upon that counts!

Becoming good marketers

There was a time when professionals didn't need to be all that concerned with what people thought about them - it was enough for them to be good at what they did and have their names in the phone book so people could find them. That time is gone forever. With the new emphasis on marketing - even in such professions as medicine, accounting, and dentistry - today's professionals must either become good marketers or watch their practices decline. Media and consumer groups now actively question methods, fees, and everything we do, so we have to work harder than ever just to keep people from forming the wrong perceptions.

If you understand positioning and use it wisely and tastefully, it can help you provide more complete care, collect more, have higher fees with less time and effort, and attract the kind of patients that you most desire. Positioning your practice will also help you overcome negative stereotypes and false perceptions that create all kinds of problems.

Of course, positioning is not as easy for professionals to do as it may sound. Most doctors we talk with are experts in their specialty - not in the field of positioning. Yet, the more you learn about how to get people to see what you do as valuable to them, the greater will be your rewards and the happier and more fulfilled your life.

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Nido Qubein is an international speaker and accomplished author on sales, communication, and leadership. He is president of High Point University, which has an enrollment of more than 3,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Qubein is chairman of Great Harvest Bread Company, which has 218 stores in 40 states. For more information, visit www.nidoqubein.com and www.highpoint.edu.

Questions to ask to create a transformational experience

Here are a few more questions for you to answer that will help you create a truly transformational experience:

1. Why should people/patients do business with us?
 2. What are the products and services we offer?
 3. What are products of our products (the benefits they provide)? Define these for each major service you provide. An example might be a splint. Nobody really wants a removable splint/night guard. The benefit of a splint for bruxism patients is to preserve their teeth and existing dentistry, thereby reducing the need for more dentistry, plus providing greater jaw and facial comfort upon arising.
 4. What is our brand (promise)?
 5. What should our park offer?
 6. How do patients find out about our park?
 7. How do we promote and position our park?
 8. Why should patients bring others to our park?
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