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#186: Elevator Speech

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Elevator Speech

How would you go about selecting a dentist if you weren't one? It's an interesting question and one that could spark a great deal of discussion within your team. My husband and I recently moved from Seattle, WA, to Spring Hill, FL, to be closer to my aging parents. And, of course, we have found ourselves having to form new relationships with many businesses and service providers. A new dry cleaner, a new accountant, a new hairdresser, anew physician, and, among many others, a new dentist. This has proved to be a major undertaking. The move was a breeze compared to what it has taken to find the right people in our new community.

In thinking about how to select a new dentist, I realized I had an opportunity to do some field research at the same time; so, I pulled out the phone book, read all of the ads and looked at all of the listings. Without a doubt, some ads made the practice seem more appealing, so I began with those dentists when I made my calls. My intention was to learn what I could about each practice I called and decide if any of them met my requirements. My opening question was simple:

"Hello, My name is Sandy Roth and I've just moved to Spring Hill. I'm looking for a new dentist. What can you tell me about your practice?" You would think I had asked the receptionist to solve a problem in quantum physics. Here is a sampling of the responses I received:

**I'm just a fill-in. You'll have to call back when Judy is here.*

Well, the doctor went to dental school at *** University and has been practicing for twelve years. He moved here five years ago.*

**Huh?*

**Oh, I don't know. He's pretty good. You'd probably like him.*

**We accept most insurances [sic] and really cater to cowards. We also have evening and Saturday hours for people who don't want to come in during the week.*

Well, it should come as no surprise that I did not choose any of the practices I called that day. But as I was reflecting on what I heard, I

realized how an event like this could easily damage even a very good practice. You see, I assumed, as would most people, that the practice couldn't be very good if the staff couldn't quickly and effectively answer the basic questions a new patient might ask. I assumed that if the staff could not or did not paint a positive and inviting picture of the practice that the dentist probably hasn't hired competent people and that his or her standards might be lower than I require. I assumed that when the practice seems at such disarray on the phone it must be in disarray elsewhere. I don't know if I'm right about these practices, but I will not even give myself a chance to find out. My research project was over.

I'm wondering what I would hear if I were to call your practice and ask the simple question, "What can you tell me about your practice?" Would the person who normally answers the phone be prepared? What would happen if someone else answered the phone? Would she or her be caught unaware, hem and haw and bluster through a weak response? Our would any member of your staff, including you, be inviting, responsive, gracious and grounded?

Many years ago, I worked in political arena in Washington, DC. I would often be on Capitol Hill meeting with members of Congress to discuss issues of importance to me and the organization I represented. While most of the conversations were held during pre-planned meetings, upon occasion I would find myself on the elevator with a Senator or Representa-

tive with whom I did not have an appointment. In anticipation of those times, I never left the office without having prepared my Elevator Speech.

What's an Elevator Speech? It is the core of your message compacted into the most vibrant, expressive words so that the listener will hear the essence of what you want to convey in the time it takes for the elevator to go from the ground floor to the seventh floor. Quick. Complete. Compelling. An elevator speech is a message that is conveyed with conviction and enthusiasm. Every practice needs an elevator speech and every team member must be prepared to deliver his or her own version of that speech at a moment's notice because you can never tell when an opportunity will arise.

For many years, practices have been compiling lofty and sometimes wordy Mission Statements or Statements of Philosophy. In a full day meeting or even a weekend retreat the dentist and staff members labor for hours to include everything they believe and stand for. In most cases, these labors of love end up rarely used and mostly forgotten, lost in a notebook stashed under a desk. Upon occasion, I see them presented in calligraphy, framed and posted on the reception room wall where they gather dust. While patients may glance at these messages, they are rarely pondered and discussed even less often. Since they are mostly about the dentist and his or her beliefs, there is usually little content to

which a patient can relate. In most cases, they simply do not make the difference they were intended to make.

Perhaps it is time to take down that copy of your Mission and Philosophy Statement and spend some time with your staff developing an Elevator Speech- your answer to the question "What can you tell me about your practice?" The science is to make your response truthful while the art is making the message compelling and inviting yet not so fluffy that the listener misses the point. In order to do that, you must address the basic question "What's in it for the patient?" Your Elevator Speech must relate first and foremost to those who might seek your services. While you may have a lot of pride in your own training, post graduate education, awards and memberships, this is not information that is compelling to a patient. The Elevator Speech is not about you. The second important aspect of the Elevator Speech is that it may only include words that would have real meaning to patients. Ask yourself what each word really means. While "excellence" and "comprehensive" may have meaning to you, it is not likely that you could make them concrete enough to convey real meaning to your potential patient. Avoid over-used platitudes - "open and honest communication," for example and trite terminology like "We cater to cowards." And whatever you do, do not reference another business or company by saying "Ritz-Carlton service" or "Nordstrom care."

When refined, your Elevator Speech will convey the following:

What business you are in
Who you serve
What principles you espouse and what you believe

Here are some examples of Elevator Speeches developed by my clients:

"I'd love to tell you about us. Thanks for asking. Our practice is designed primarily to help adults who want to look better while maintaining a healthy mouth and minimizing the possibility of further breakdown and disease. We help people best who are clear about what is important to them and who are ready to reverse the aesthetic damage that occurs over time."

"Yes, indeed. We focus exclusively on cosmetic dentistry and work mostly with adult patients. While we do not provide general dentistry, we work with your general dentist and other specialists to help you achieve the aesthetic appearance you want while not overlooking other dental issues. We work hard to make sure we understand what is important to you and we design our care with that in mind."

"Thank you so much for asking about our practice, and I hope it is just what you are looking for. While we provide general care to our patients, our growing interest is in

cosmetic enhancement. We first make certain that our patients are sound and healthy, free from breakdown and disease, in order to give them the best chance of an appearance change that will look attractive for a long time."

"Of course. We are a Family practice, so we work with both adults and children. We believe that the best dentistry is no dentistry at all, so we work hard to make sure that we provide the preventive care and support that will help busy adults and their families maintain their factory authorized parts and avoid dental problems that can be costly and uncomfortable. We encourage our patients to anticipate potential problems and eliminate the factors that we know cause dental disease. Our focus is on helping people become and stay healthy while improving their appearance. Where conditions are not optimal, we focus on restoring health and stability with dentistry that is appearance-enhancing."

The process of developing your own Elevator Speech is challenging, for you must refine your message to its essence while avoiding all of the window dressing that is so compelling but meaningless. The beginning is where it should be. The dentist must become clear about the purpose of the practice, the patient base he or she is intending to serve, the standards of care that will govern the delivery of care and the beliefs and ethics that the practice will uphold. Once that is done, the Elevator Speech is a snap, but getting to that point

will require discipline, reflection and personal commitment on the part of the dentist. It is vitally important to commit only to those things you really believe - not what you hope will sell or sound good. If you don't own it you won't be able to do it.

I mentioned earlier that each member of the team must develop his or her own way to convey the essence of the Elevator Speech when an opportunity arises. You will notice that the words in each of the examples above are carefully chosen to convey a set of principles and beliefs as well as to outline the nature of the practice and the patients they serve. The examples above are not intended to be a new script to memorize and rattle off in every situation, however. On the contrary, these examples are the deeply-held intention of each of the dentists leading his or her team. The words convey the concepts the staff must know and understand in order to represent the practice properly - not the words they might actually use. While it may feel awkward initially, but with some practice, each member of the team will be able to develop a personalized way to invite patients into the practice. Without an Elevator Speech, however, your staff members may be left with only a single word response: "Huh?"