

Don't Be a Waldo

Dentistry is always changing, but there are a number of recent events that are happening right under our nose. Some of these changes are going to have a dramatic effect on how the average dental practice will look in the next decade. Much like the squeeze on the middle class, the average practice owned and operated by a solo dentist may disappear in the not too distant future. However, a select few will find ways to separate themselves from the pack and excel within the new economy of dentistry.

The pressures facing dentistry are varied – some are backed by big money, some are demographic in nature, but all are powerful.

1. **Insurance** – insurance dependant dentists continue to feel the screws tightening from big business and often lose the battle of perception waged through the media
2. **Corporate Dentistry** – dental chains are expanding with the support of billions of investment dollars and have economy of scale on their side (for those that treat dentistry as a commodity)
3. **Dental Tourism** – hundreds of thousands of US citizens are traveling abroad every year for the perceived cheaper fix
4. **Too Many Dentists** – dental schools continue to graduate the same number of dentists, while those nearing retirement are practicing longer – this is resulting in higher competition among dentists especially in urban centers

Everyone knows Waldo. He is the lovable cartoon character in the red and white striped shirt, glasses and toque (Canadian for winter hat) that hides in photos. It seems that he should be easy to find, but when he is placed in a picture with hundreds of other people and buildings, some of which have similar patterns, it becomes very difficult. Dentists always believe that they are doing things that stand out – but often those things are not nearly as unique as we imagine.

So how can we really stand out? How do we avoid getting swallowed up by the corporate giants?

First, we have to do a little work. You and your team need to have a crystal clear vision of the values of your practice. That should be summarized in a mission statement that everyone on the team knows forward and backward. That mission will dictate day to day decision making, training, and long range planning for your practice.

From there, the practice needs to have at least a few areas where they excel – and those areas need to matter enough for patients to want to come to your practice in the first place, or stay with your practice if someone else starts doing something that is unique.



A few areas that your practice can stand out:

Clinical Skill

While most potential patients do not select their dentist based on the variety of procedures that they provide, there are some areas of practice that patients will seek out very specifically.

1. **Neuromuscular dentistry** – people are willing to travel hundreds of miles to have their chronic pain treated – Neuromuscular dentists are uniquely qualified to provide this care
2. **Implants** – demand for this procedure continues to grow and those providing both surgical placement and restoration are well positioned to benefit
3. **Sedation** – for extreme dental phobes, sedation is the first, last, and only thing that they are interested in from their dentist
4. **Orthodontics**, and to a lesser extent cosmetics, continue to make the list of procedures for which patients are seeking, specifically qualified dentists

Communication

This is a far more important means by which to make your practice stand out. It influences the image we project, and it plays an enormous role in any internal marketing strategy.

Far too often, it is mistakes or lack of education in this area that lead to patient dissatisfaction. We need to ask our patients more questions to uncover their specific objections. We need to show compassion and understanding when getting to know our new patients to establish trust. We need to do a much better job of communicating financials to our patients before treatment begins.

There are countless other examples, but a practice that exhibits great communication skills will in turn have stronger relationships with their patients who will be much less likely to leave for another practice for any reason.

Besides clinical skills and communication, there are a multitude of other areas that can be used to separate your practice from the others – advertising, branding and image, and amenities for comfort to name a few. But even with outstanding clinical skills, and fantastic communication, there is one thing that ultimately will determine how successful you can become – and that is...

Sincerity

Sincerity refers to action made without pretense, deceit, and hypocrisy and its utilization is in dramatic decline. Life gets much easier when you say what you mean. It may sound simple, but how often have we been fooled by someone who came across as sincere but ended up being a con artist. The good news is that over time, those not possessing sincerity will be revealed as deceitful people and will suffer the consequences.

How do patients judge our sincerity outside of face to face conversations? Patient's see sincerity in our actions – are our practices involved in the community? Do they walk the walk when it comes to helping others? When our patients and prospective patients feel that connection; it leads to loyalty, it leads to case acceptance, and it leads to fulfillment.

These sentiments are perhaps best articulated below.

**"Originality is a
by-product of sincerity."**
-Unknown

**"The secret of success
is sincerity."**
-Jean Giroux

That is how not to be a Waldo.



Dr. Drew Markham pictured with his team.