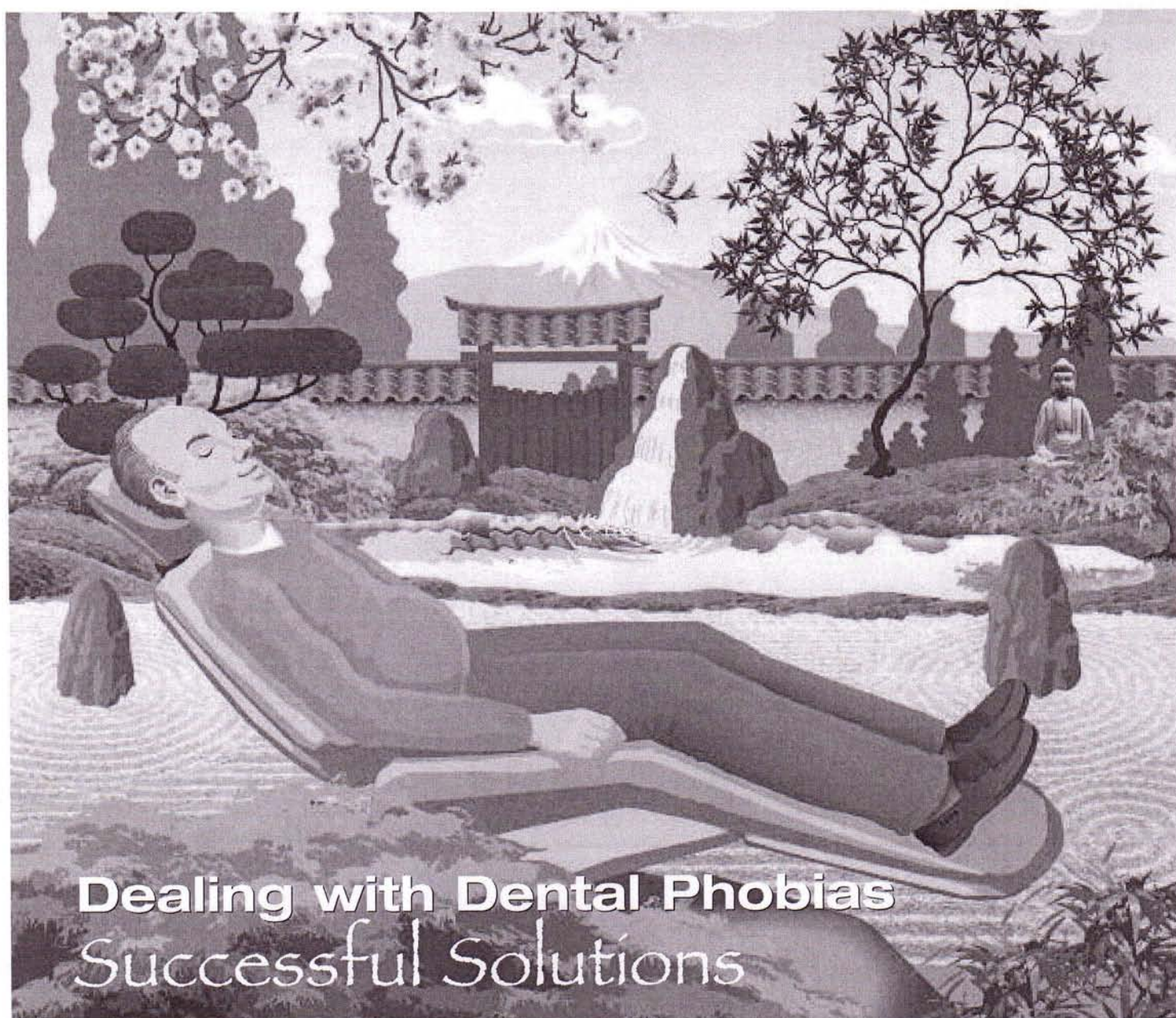


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Dealing with Dental Phobias Successful Solutions

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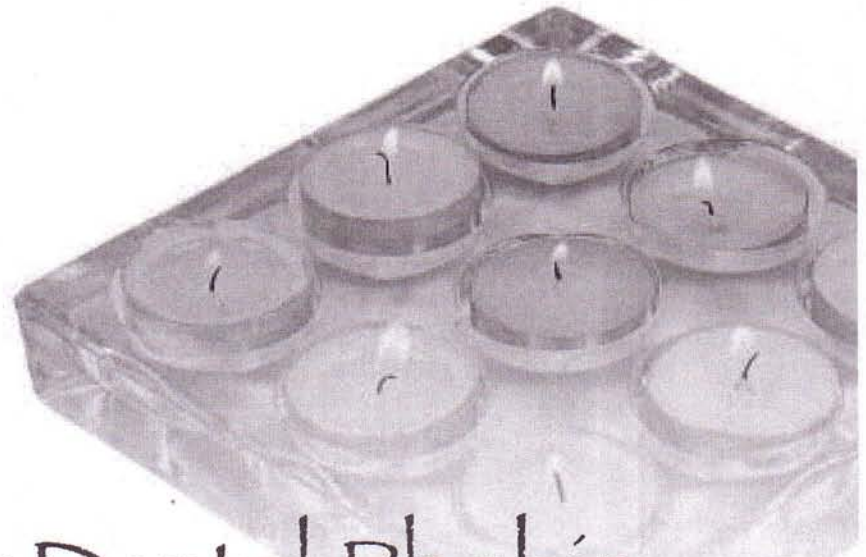


Steve Klein, B. Comm MBA

upfront

Cover Article

OD



Overcoming Dental Phobia: A Marketer's Perspective

- A professional marketer offers solutions to alleviate the fears that plague many dental patients.



While some people suffer from a level of anxiety when visiting the dentist, there is a very high percentage of adults who suffer from a fear so intense they would rather lose their teeth than walk through your door. A University of Toronto study¹ puts this number at 16 percent; other studies have placed it as high as 21 percent. People with dental phobia aren't merely anxious — they are absolutely terrified of receiving dental treatment.

"Often when my patients had a bad dental experience as a child, their anxiety is strongest," says Dr. Tanya Bracanovich of Sparks Dental Clinic in Ottawa. "I see this most often in middle-aged men."

The use of sedatives and dental lasers may not be enough to fully overcome the feeling of vulnerability that may come from lying in a dental chair. As a professional marketer, I have learned that there's no single solution to overcoming dental phobia — the dentists who are most successful adopt a wide range of strategies that improve the total patient experience — from making an appointment to paying the bill.

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Adopt an Open Door Policy

Is the entrance to your practice hidden behind a closed door? Would it lead a nervous patient to speculate what is going on behind that door or to feel trapped once it shuts behind them? Dental practices in malls or hotel lobbies have the advantage of having a "no-door", completely open entrance that creates the impression that anyone can walk in and be welcomed into the office. If keeping your door open isn't a feasible option, invest in transparent glass doors that send the message to prospective patients that you have nothing to hide.

Help Your Patients Relax

How inviting is your waiting room? Is it decorated in cold, clinical colours like white and blue? Is the floor covered in dark grey carpet or sterile tiles?

Consider hiring a designer with experience in decorating spas or other spaces intended to help people relax. Use colours like tan or cinnamon, as warm tones instantly create a visually more relaxing atmosphere. Invest in comfortable furniture and create a living-room setting — your waiting room is really a staging area to encourage the first stage of relaxation in the patient. Offer magazines that focus on health and lifestyle, reinforcing the message that a visit to the dentist is about taking care of yourself. You could also invest in an aromatherapy machine.

At the Kanata, Ont. office of Dr. Charles Kamel of MySmile.ca, none of the staff wears clerical uniforms or medical scrubs — they are all dressed in ordinary, everyday clothes.

"We want our office to be as warm and friendly as possible," says Treatment Co-ordinator Rose Vitagliano. "We don't want to look like a hospital. When they see the scrubs, some patients may become afraid."

Pampered

Do spa-like treatments actually reduce patient anxiety? Or are they just another needless expense for the dentist?



A cursory Internet search confirms that more Canadian dental practices are adding spa-like services and offering alternative treatments, such as massage chairs and aromatherapy, to their mix. But while most dentists would support efforts to help relax patients, they generally caution that a fine line

exists between perks and a careful practice.

Spa dentistry is an umbrella term covering a host of health practices including complementary treatments such as massage and beauty treatments that have become mainstays in dental offices around the world. The trend is an outgrowth of the increasing popularity of cosmetic dentistry — procedures such as teeth whitening and smile-perfecting veneers — and for over a decade now has been gaining in popularity in the United States where there is a move toward more patient-centered care in dentistry.

For many Ontario dentists however the bone of contention is whether this pampering approach is good dentistry or old-fashioned hucksterism. According to Dr. Ian Weir of Ford Village Dentistry and Anesthesia in Oakville, "We have the highest standard of health care in Ontario" and spa-style services should be kept separate from a dental operation. Offers Dr Weir: "A good dentist with clinical care skills will survive without gimmicks."

Au contraire, says Dr. Arun Narang, who practises implant, cosmetic and restorative dentistry in Mississauga and Oakville. There is a serious medical purpose behind this, beyond the obvious competitive push-and-pull factors for revenue: there's good reason to think that a stress-free, relaxed patient is one who suffers less and whose treatment is more effective. "Spa dentistry is about creating comfortable distractions, so patients are not stressed while they are in the dental chair," says Dr. Narang. "Fear is replaced with feeling good."

"I am in the business of dentistry and spa-like therapies are used as an adjunct to what I do and can be used to help distract highly phobic patients," says Dr. Narang. Beside the clinical procedures offered at Oakville Dental Arts, clients can also enjoy an espresso, fruit juice or Perrier, cookies, multimedia headsets, neck pillows, polar fleece blankets and, on request, can even arrange for paraffin treatments or reflexology.

Superfluous as some of these amenities may seem, each is chosen for a reason. Therapeutic massage, for example, will help you to relax and reduce your anxiety levels but also may boost the circulatory and immune systems to benefit blood pressure and circulation. In Dr. George Arvanitis' Waterloo, Ont. office, aromatherapy candles are used to



Photo courtesy of Dr. Tanya Bracovich, Ottawa

Sparks Dental Clinic in Ottawa offers patients a relaxing experience.

Patients



Photos courtesy of Dr. George Arvanitis, Waterloo.



Dr. George Arvanitis' reception area was designed to resemble an upscale café, offering herbal teas and specialty coffees, including cappuccino and espresso.

mask the "oil of cloves" smell associated with dental offices. His cosmetic dentistry, surgical and implant practice also boasts a fish tank in the lobby and a reception area/café.

"There are always trailblazers who push the envelope," says Dr. Jordan Soll, who runs a full-service cosmetic dentistry boutique in Toronto. "Whether or not we should offer certain complementary services is a question of comfort level." Paradoxically, he agonized over having a coffee station when he moved to his state-of-the-art location in Toronto and decided against it.

However, after a long appointment, patients in Dr. Soll's office can enjoy a paraffin wax or a massage because these treatments have intrinsic therapeutic value.

Even Dr. Weir was not immune to the benefits of incorporating ergonomic design principles and spa-like décor features into his practice four years ago. After brainstorming about what the ideal dental environment should look like, Dr. Weir and his staff chose a location with south-facing windows and had nine-foot windows cut so there would be "enough natural light and always something to look at."

Dr. Weir's office did have a few firsts in Canada when it comes to making the environment less clinical, he says. Every patient is offered a hot or cold beverage while they wait, earphones are provided for those who want to watch TV, chairs have built-in back massagers, hot face towels and warm fleece blankets are available for cozying up.

In general, alternate treatments tend to be free of charge to patients because they cost the office little to implement, says Dr. Narang. And if used responsibly, without interfering with regular clinical modalities, these treatments are value-added services that will sooner or later be embraced by many more health practitioners. "After all," asks Dr. Narang, "Who had TVs in their operatories in 1984? The trend to make patients comfortable is here to stay." ●

Create Mood Lighting

Harsh fluorescent office lighting is more suitable for undergoing a tax audit than maintaining healthy gums. Consider upgrading to warm incandescent or UV lighting with adjustable levels throughout the entire office. Even better, try to flood your office with natural lighting wherever possible. Another nice touch is to add accent lamps on tables in the waiting room or treatment areas.

Decorate the Washroom

Most patients will visit the washroom at the beginning or end of their appointment. This is another opportunity for you to help them relax, so continue with the spa-like decor. Use warm light fixtures and decorate in colours that are flattering to skin tones. Offer hand towels, cups and a pleasant mouthwash.

Welcome Your Patients

Most dental receptionists are multitaskers. They're busy talking on the phone and keeping track of who's arrived and are usually physically isolated from the patient by a desk. Invest in training your staff on how to say "hello" in a sincere way and connect with patients as they arrive. Sometimes it's as simple as having the receptionist stand up and usher the patient into the waiting room or offer them a magazine or a cup of coffee that can make the difference. The first contact with a patient is a golden opportunity to help put them at ease.

Personalize the Chairside Experience

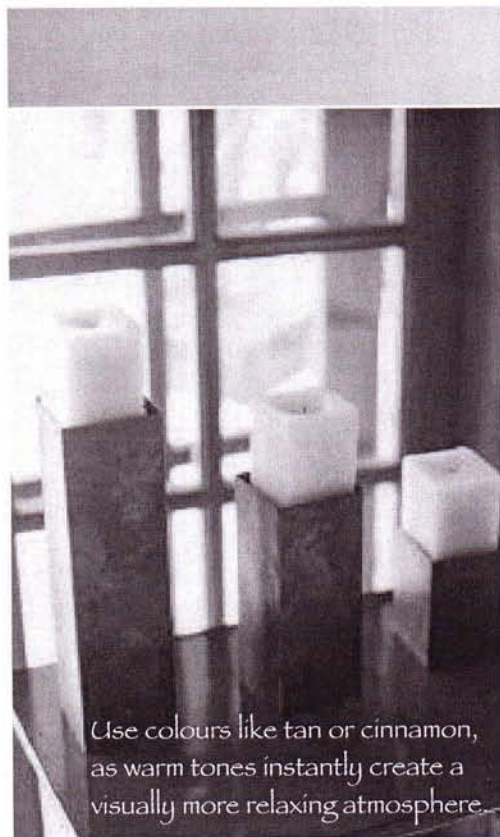
Your staff has done an excellent job welcoming the patients. Once they enter the treatment room, it's now up to you to reassure them that this

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positive experience will continue. Give them time to settle into the chair by talking to them. To offer that personal touch, keep a "quick glance" file on the names of the patient's family members, special events in their life and their likes and dislikes.

A dental fear survey like the one used by the Mount Sinai Dental Clinic² in New York may be useful for categorizing patients (low anxiety, moderate anxiety, phobic) and will help you identify triggers in advance. Knowing how a patient will react to certain treatments before the procedure begins will allow you to better personalize the dental experience.

Encourage your patients to ask questions about the procedure and use this opportunity to reassure them. The more information you have about patients' anxiety, the better you will be equipped to tailor the chair-side experience to their needs.



Use colours like tan or cinnamon, as warm tones instantly create a visually more relaxing atmosphere.

Entertain Your Patients

The bane of all dental practices is the high-pitched shrill sound of the drill. Dr. Bracanovich says that sound is the biggest factor in creating anxiety. She suggests keeping your waiting room isolated from the sounds emanating from treatment rooms. Wiring your entire practice for sound is relatively inexpensive and will mask the sounds that may set your patient's teeth on edge.

Too often dental practices tune into hard rock stations or barely audible talk shows. Select stations with music appropriate to your "spa setting" or invest in a library of relaxing CDs or MP3s. You can even offer your patients a selection of music to choose from while they're waiting. For longer procedures, patients could have the option of watching cable TV or movies on a widescreen television installed in the ceiling or listening to music on wireless headphones.

Put Your Imagination to Work


Finding innovative ways to distract and relax your patients is limited only by your imagination. Some dentists have designed dental "theme rooms" around sports memorabilia, Hollywood movies and local history. Success is one step closer when the patient says, "this doesn't feel like a dentist's office."

Ultimately, if you can relax and distract your patients, you will help them manage their dental phobia better.

Begin to see your practice through your patients' eyes. The more sensitive you are to meeting their needs, the more positive "word of mouth" advertising you'll receive from them.



Finding innovative ways to distract and relax your patients is limited only by your imagination.

Dr. Bracanovich says many patients decide to come to her clinic because they've heard about its homey and welcoming atmosphere. In the end, you may be rewarded with both improved patient retention and many new referrals. What's true for marketing is true for dentistry. 

Endnotes:

1. David Locker, *Onset of and patterns of change in dental anxiety in adolescence and early adulthood*. Published by University of Toronto, 1999.
2. The Mount Sinai Dental Fear Questionnaire can be found online at: www.dentalfear.net/phobia/quest.html

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