

Mary H. Osborne, Resources

PRACTICE RENEWAL

A Leadership Guide for Dentists

Meaning, Mission & Marketing

I heard an interesting story from a dentist recently about one of his patients. She had been coming to his practice for some time for routine care, but at a recent hygiene visit she said she would not be back to his office for her next visit. She told him in a matter of fact way that she was going to see a “cosmetic dentist” she had read about in a local magazine. She had been saving her money for some time to have some cosmetic work done, and now she was ready. Her dentist was shocked, to say the least.

I don’t know this dentist well, but I believe he is a fine dentist. He genuinely cares for his patients and has a strong sense of mission regarding dentistry. He has had extensive clinical training to develop his skills and extensive experience in delivering all types of care, including excellent esthetic services.

He believed he had a good relationship with the woman who told him she was going to see another dentist. She had not indicated that she was dissatisfied with his care in any way. Still, she was choosing to go to a dentist she did not even know be-

cause he ran ads in a local magazine identifying himself as a “cosmetic dentist.”

How They Relate

You can easily see what this story has to do with marketing, but you may be asking, “What has any of this got to do with meaning or mission?” I believe it has everything to do with meaning and mission. I believe that all three are inseparable, that one without the other two can create a void which has the potential to significantly damage our work and our profession.

I see *meaning* as an internal sense about our work, *mission* as the way we want our work to impact others, and *marketing* as the way we help others understand the first two. Thoughts about meaning, mission, and marketing have been on my mind for some time. I feel passionate about the need for our profession to be grounded in integrity and a strong sense of mission. I believe just as strongly that those of us who have a sense of mission

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must find a way to give voice to it. We must find a way to help the public hear the voice of compassion, integrity, and commitment to health that is sometimes drowned out by voices of opportunism.

Meaning

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word *meaning* as “something that is felt to be the inner significance of something.” The way our work has meaning is very specific to each individual; no two people experience the meaning of their work in exactly the same way. The more you understand what that inner significance is for you, the more you can develop that in your practice.

When I think of meaning, I think of the parts of what I do that provide me with an inner sense of fulfillment, the things that allow me to feel good about what I do, whether or not anyone else knows about it. For example, my mother was an Irish immigrant who cleaned houses as a young girl and was the head of housekeeping at a hospital in her later years. I learned from her to take great satisfaction from cleaning a room from top to bottom, “including all the corners” as my mother would say. I have often felt that the apple did not fall far from the tree when as a hygienist, I experienced a similar sense of satisfaction from smooth root surfaces.

Certainly, smooth root surfaces were only a small part of the reason I enjoyed hygiene, but my particular sense of satisfaction in that process is unique to me. Of course, there were many other aspects of hygiene which also had personal meaning for me. The relationships I had with patients, the opportunity to influence their health, and the stimulation of working with a team of caring professionals are a few that come to mind.

What Has Meaning for You?

In thinking about what makes your work meaningful, avoid the temptation to narrow your focus or over simplify the process. Consider all the aspects of your work that cause you to feel fulfilled. What makes your work significant to you is complex, and there is a richness to that complexity.

You may want to ask yourself what elements of your work you enjoy for their own sake.

- ◆ What are the things you do that provide you with a sense of satisfaction which others may not understand?
- ◆ What rewards do you get from your work that you would want to find a way to continue to enjoy if you, for example, won the lottery?

Mary H. Osborne's *Practice Renewal* is published by Mary H. Osborne, *Resources*. This leadership guide is designed to challenge, inspire, and support dentists and their teams.

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- ◆ What are the parts of your work you would miss if you were retired?

The answers to those questions may give you insights into your personal sense of meaning.

Understanding what has meaning for you helps you to create systems and structure which allow you to do more of what you most enjoy doing. While it may not be possible to eliminate all aspects of your work that you do not enjoy, I believe everyone has a right to move toward work that is meaningful.

Understanding what has meaning for you also allows you to better understand what makes your work distinctive. The experiences you have had, the character qualities you bring to your work, your unique perspective on both people and procedures, the skills you have honed as well as your special gifts and talents all add up to a unique package that is the essence of your practice.

Mission

Mission has to do with *how* you bring your internal sense of significance to the service of others. I remember when I first heard of the concept of mission in regard to work, it sounded rather high minded, and I wasn't sure if I had a sense of mission. I knew I enjoyed helping people, but I had never thought of that in terms of "mission."

Over the years I have come to understand that I am in fact very mission driven. Eventually, through the work of Don Clifton and the Selection Research Institute, I learned to listen for that quality in others. I came to see a sense of mission as a key indicator of how effective one was likely to be in dentistry.

I remember interviewing a young woman many years ago who taught me that mission was truly

possible in virtually any good work. She told me that she used to own an ice cream stand and would explain to her employees that they were making a difference in people's lives. She told them that the act of buying an ice cream cone may be the only nice thing a particular customer does for him/herself that day. She instructed her employees to do whatever they could do to help that customer feel good about the purchase. She was highly mission driven and is the only person I have ever heard who found a sense of mission in selling ice cream cones!

One can have a sense of mission about almost any kind of work. *Mission has more to do with our belief system about the work than about the particular kind of work we do.* When we have a sense of mission, we see our work as something more than just a way to earn a living (although most of us also like to receive a paycheck). When we have a sense of mission, we want our work to have meaning for us, and we want it to make a positive difference to and for others. Mission has intentionality.

One of the definitions of mission in my *American Heritage Dictionary* is "a self-imposed duty." It implies that the standards for how you do your work come from within, not from regulated external standards but from your internal sense of ethics and appropriateness of treatment. Unlike most commodity-based businesses, in a profession like dentistry we are expected to put the needs of the patient first, and mission is critical for doing that.

What is the Impact You Want To Have?

A number of dentists I have known discovered aspects of their sense of mission when they were about to retire. When I asked one dentist what he thought he would miss most about being in dentistry, he said it was the opportunity

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to participate in helping young people on his team grow and develop both personally and professionally. He always knew he had a strong commitment to team and believed that investing in them was a good investment for the practice. However, he had never identified it as part of his mission until he thought about how he might replace that sense of meaning in his retirement years.

Whether the effect is on team or on patients, it is important to ask yourself *what impact you want your work to have on others. Understanding what gives you pleasure in your work is one window into what makes you unique. Another aspect is how you want to make a difference in the lives of others. You cannot control the impact you have on others, but you can approach it with intention.*

Helping people keep their teeth for the rest of their lives is an important mission, for example, but the context in which you do that will be very personal to you. How do you want to help people keep their teeth? Are you okay with intimidating them into it, or do you want to also help them feel good about keeping their teeth? Do you want to have a positive impact on their self-esteem? Do you want to help them take control of their overall health? Do you want to help them see that life is about choices?

Again, avoid the temptation to over-simplify. *What are all of the ways in which you want to make a difference in the lives of others?* Self-esteem can be enhanced when you improve a smile with beautiful esthetic dentistry. Self-esteem can also be improved by helping someone feel good about the way his appearance without changing the way anything looks, if it is done in a way that is supportive, not dismissive, of his concerns. Self-esteem can be enhanced by helping people feel more in control of their health. It can be enhanced by helping them feel more in control of their financial decisions and the choices they make. In dentistry we have opportu-

nities to empower people in regard to their health on so many levels.

We can perform dentistry on children in a way that simply eliminates disease, and we can also do it in a way that empowers them to make choices. We can help them see health as a choice and help them move toward health instead of just away from disease. We can meet the expectations of older patients by telling them what they need, or we can challenge them to think about what they want. I could go on and on, but I will never name all of the ways in which your practice can impact the lives of others. I hope you will give yourself that gift.

If we define mission as a “self-imposed duty,” your answers to these and other questions are significant. If you say that part of your mission is enhancing self-esteem in other people, it doesn’t mean that you will do it if it seems convenient. Mission implies more of a commitment than that. You can’t control another person’s response and may not always be successful at helping him feel good about himself, but mission does entail a sense of dedication to the principle.

The Spirit of Your Practice

As each person becomes more aware of what gives meaning to his/her work and as a team you determine how you want your work to impact others, your practice becomes more vital. Clarity about meaning and mission make up the spirit of your practice. They help form a system of beliefs that make your practice truly distinctive, and that philosophy also contributes to meaning and mission. It generates a self-sustaining cycle of increased clarity and increased vitality. As your work becomes more intentional, you become more aware of all the ways in which you are rewarded and of the difference you make in the lives of those you serve.

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The resulting philosophy is a combination of many forces within a practice, some of which will change over time and some of which will not. Those forces will include:

- ◆ **Beliefs:** Your beliefs about life shape your philosophy of practice, beliefs about people, health, dentistry, and choices. Do you believe that people are generally honest and trustworthy or more likely not worthy of trust? What do you believe constitutes health? What do you believe about pain or comfort in regard to dental treatment? Do you believe your dentistry is affordable? What do you believe about balance in your life? *Your beliefs effect how you structure your systems and your communication.*
- ◆ **Knowledge:** The specific training you have had influences your perspective. Dr. Bob Barkley indicated that in some ways his relationships with patients were easier when he had less clinical training. The more you know, the more you see: the more you see, the more responsibility you have to inform your patients.
- ◆ **Experience:** How you have used your training also affects your philosophy. The mistakes you have worked through and the mentors who supported you will affect future choices. The insights you have gained through your less successful efforts are a part of the fiber of your practice.
- ◆ **Skill:** The level of skill you have developed shapes your decision making process. Where you feel most skilled you are more likely to find your work satisfying. You may also be more courageous in trying new things or taking on more challenging treatment.
- ◆ **Confidence:** Your level of confidence has a significant influence on your practice. Clinical confidence includes three elements: understanding the underlying causes of a prob-

lem, communicating about it in a way that helps patients understand and own the problem, and delivering the appropriate treatment to solve the problem. Confidence in your judgment and your motives is also a force in your practice. Confidence in your self effects every conversation you have, every decision you make, and every action you take.

Clarity

As you and your team explore questions of meaning and mission, your sense of clarity grows about how you are unique. You come to see how the individual pieces come together to form the whole, how beliefs and values and learning merge into a sharper picture about how you practice.

For example, in the reference I made earlier to my work as a hygienist it could be said that it was not in my nature to be less than thorough. Since I also want dentistry to be comfortable, I was not willing to sacrifice comfort for thoroughness and learned to do whatever it took to assure the comfort of my patients. Since I also see empowerment as part of my mission, I looked for ways to involve the patient in the decision making process about questions of anesthesia or other ways they might be involved. When I worked for a dentist who also wanted his patients to feel special, I added that to my focus as well. One value, belief, skill, etc. is layered upon another to create a uniquely personalized experience for the patient.

That melding of qualities of care creates a sense of confidence in what you do as a practice. It is not confidence based on competition, doing it better than someone else. It is rather a deep seated confidence based on simple clarity about who you are, what you stand for, what gives meaning to your work, and how you want your work to affect others.

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Marketing

Marketing closes the gap between what you know about yourselves and how you are perceived by your existing and prospective patients. Marketing gives voice to both meaning and mission. Whether the marketing is internal or external, it allows others to understand how your practice is distinctive and, most importantly, *how that distinction serves them.*

I used to believe that all we had to do was demonstrate our competence and our care and patients would appreciate our work enough to tell others about us. There is no question that “walking your talk” is an important element of success, but I have come to understand that it is not enough. In a world in which people are bombarded with choices, *you must find a way to help them choose you, and continue to choose you.*

Marketing your practice not only serves you well, but it can also serve your community well. It allows those who want the unique approach to dental health that you provide to find you; that is good for you and for them. Marketing also has the potential to influence the way people think about dentistry and the expectations they have of our profession. Marketing provides you with a forum for raising a different voice about dentistry.

External Marketing

When people talk with me about marketing, they tend to focus primarily on external marketing. What kind of website should they have? Is it a good idea to advertise in newspapers or magazines? How can they create a brochure that represents their practice well? All of these are important considerations and should be approached with a great deal of care and thought, and *the process of deciding and developing will*

be at least as important as the final product. I suggest to practices that they work with experts on those projects who will take the time to truly understand the qualities that make their practice distinctive and create materials which reflect those distinctions.

Some practices are uncomfortable with marketing. The idea that it is not appropriate to promote yourself may come from traditional attitudes in our profession. There was a time when an “advertising dentist” was looked down upon by the profession. It was believed that if you were good enough at what you did, you would not need to market yourself. Advertising was seen as unprofessional.

Attitudes are changing. Advertising can still be unprofessional. I see examples of it all the time, and it concerns me. But advertising can also be very professional and can have a positive effect on a given practice and on the profession as a whole.

In the current culture of access to incredible amounts of information delivered in easily digested bites with highly sophisticated visuals, *it is important to present yourself to the public in ways that are up-to-date and attractive. Websites are no longer optional in my opinion.* I still amaze myself by how accustomed I have become to looking first for a website when exploring a new product or service. I never ask for a phone number first, always a website.

When someone tells me about a new restaurant, I want to see how the restaurant presents itself online, and I add that to what the referring source has told me as I form an opinion. The website might also allow me to represent that restaurant to the person with whom I will be having dinner. It helps me promote the restaurant to another person and assure that we go into the experience with similar expectations.

How we present ourselves in print is also important. How our message is presented is as impor-

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tant as what is said. If it is not presented in a way that is easy to take in, the content will never be read. I would favor a simple letter, carefully edited and proofed, over a brochure that is too crowded with information and not designed well.

Effective marketing conveys a deeper message than words alone can express. The best professional designers are interested in understanding the deeper message that sets your practice apart.

Internal Marketing

I have often wondered why there seems to be so much emphasis on external marketing when most practices are not fully utilizing their internal marketing opportunities. It occurs to me that for many people, it seems easier to pay someone else to promote them than it is for them to promote themselves. I have seen practices willing to spend a great deal of time and money developing a brochure, but not willing to invest a few minutes to look a patient in the eye and ask for a referral.

Attitudes about internal marketing can come from beliefs we developed at a very early age, beliefs that it was wrong to “blow your own horn,” that it was not appropriate to call attention to yourself. When it comes to talking about ourselves, we may believe that we have only two choices, either self-deprecating or self-aggrandizing: I either represent myself as meek and modest, or as self-important and egotistical. That kind of dualistic, black and white thinking does not allow for shades of grey. It does not recognize all the places in between in which one can be both humble and proud.

I believe that promoting your practice has to do with communicating clearly about what makes your practice extraordinary: not extraordinary in the sense of better than any other practice, but extraordinary in the particular way you take care

of people. For all the reasons we talked about earlier, only you can provide your service in the way that you provide it. When you bring your collective sense of meaning and mission and your combined gifts and talents to your work, your practice is literally beyond compare.

What's in It for Them?

One-on-one conversations are the most effective way to market your practice. Your clarity about meaning and mission are foundational to those conversations. But ultimately marketing is not about you; it's about your patients. An appropriate question to ask about what you have identified as important to you is, “So what?” The appropriate question for patients to be concerned about is, “What's in it for me?” **Your challenge is to help your patients see how what you have to offer can help them get what they want.**

Quite frankly, your patients don't have a need to know all about you or your practice. One of the problems I often see with brochures, for example, is that they try to cover all the information anyone might ever want to know. Patients have to wade through information about how a practice deals with insurance even if they don't have any insurance or don't care about those details. **The most effective marketing is personalized and relationship based.**

The more you know about your patients, the more effective your marketing will be. In the story about the patient who was leaving a practice to see a “cosmetic dentist,” it seems clear that there were missed opportunities. We might ask whether or not the dentist had brochures about esthetic dentistry in his reception area. We might wonder if he has pictures on the walls of patients whose smile he has restored, or if he had a website that emphasized his training in cosmetic procedures. All of those questions would be useful and important to ask. But the question

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that comes to my mind has to do with what the practice really knew about that particular patient. *While it seems clear that she did not know enough about her dentist, they also did not know enough about her to offer her their best.*

I wonder about the conversations that have occurred over the years she has been coming in for hygiene visits. I don't think it is necessary to bombard her with information or embarrass her with comments about the state of her smile. But I know only too well how easy it is to fall into a routine with long-term patients and come to believe I know all there is to know about them. This woman reported that she had been saving for cosmetic dentistry for some time, and the practice had no idea. *When we fail to bring our curiosity about who this patient is today, we will miss opportunities.*

Whether it is a new patient or one who has been in our practice for years, the questions we should be asking ourselves on a regular basis are:

- ◆ How might what we have to offer serve this person well today?
- ◆ How might his/her needs and wants have changed over the years?
- ◆ What do I know about changes in his/her life that might affect his/her health or self-image?

When your patients experience you as genuinely concerned about their health and well-being, they will see you as a resource in making choices related to all aspects of their health. They will seek your opinions and your counsel.

By all means, have the handouts available and show the pictures in the reception area, but don't expect that to take the place of one-on-one conversations. The pictures and websites are to some degree generic. If I am your patient, I may or may not see how they relate to me. Your chal-

lenge, and your opportunity, is to show me *how they relate to me.*

Share Your Stories

When we are clear and enthusiastic about what we have to offer, we are more able to see opportunities to talk about it. When we feel connected to our patients, we can be more open about our enthusiasm, less guarded in our conversations. The more connected we are with each patient, the easier it is to share our passion for what we do.

Much has been written about how to help patients see the value of what we do, from features and benefits to hot buttons. But the most effective way to share your passion is through your stories — not stories about you, but about the difference you make in the lives of others.

In relationship-based practices we are privileged to receive feedback on the way we impact the lives of our patients. I see it in practices I visit all across the country: letters, cards, and notes sent by patients. I hear conversations about one person who cried tears of joy when he looked in the mirror and saw the transformation that had occurred with the new veneers. I have heard patients say they were ashamed to smile in photographs because of their teeth and that now they can't stop smiling. One patient I met said he used to lose sleep the night before a dental appointment, and now he is so relaxed he can fall asleep in the dental chair.

I have seen children come in the door holding on to their mother's skirts and leave looking like they own the place. I've laughed with teenagers who have asked, "When are you going to give me the shot?" and seen their shock when they realized they have already been injected. I have heard older patients who struggled for years with dentures talk about how different their lives are now that they have implants.

You have heard similar stories in your practice. Those stories have the potential to make a difference in the lives of others. Our feeble attempts at “educating” our patients pale in comparison with the powerful story of someone else’s experience as it relates to them. ***Real stories about real people have the power to move others to action in a way that information alone never will. Long after they have forgotten the details, people remember the feeling they had when they heard a story.***

If someone else can get over her fear, I can see possibilities for myself, not in a theoretical sense, but in a way that is concrete. If I know that you can understand someone else’s fears, embarrassments, or struggles, I can believe that you can understand mine. If the lives of others have been changed in a positive way, mine also can be.

Learn to listen for the stories. Treasure them. Share the stories in great detail with each other. Celebrate the stories together. And learn to tell your stories with enthusiasm, grace, conviction, and gratitude. Share your passion for the work you do in the context of your mission, the difference you make in the lives of others. Allow yourself to be passionate about what you want for your patients.

Share your stories with new patients, existing patients, and potential patients. When you talk about your work in any context, talk about the difference you make with real stories of real people. The next time someone you meet socially tells you how everyone hates the dentist, look them straight in the eye and tell them what a patient you treated had to say about how your practice has made a difference in his or her life. Let them know that you would like for them to have a better experience in a dental office and that you would welcome the opportunity to change their perception about dentistry and dentists.

Humility

In closing, I’d like to speak to the concept of humility. Many of us were taught that humility was a virtue we should cultivate, and we may see that in conflict with the idea of marketing ourselves. It is easy to begin to see marketing as what my mother might have called “puffing yourself up.”

I once heard a story about Ben Franklin and his process of identifying the values by which he would live his life. As I recall the story, Ben took some time as a young man to contemplate his future, and he came up with a set of twelve values by which he wanted to live his life. When he showed the set of values to a friend, his friend said that they were great values, but he had forgotten to put the value of humility on his list. Ben agreed to add humility as the thirteenth value on his list.

In later years when Ben Franklin looked back on his life, he was proud to be able to say that in fact he had lived his life in a way that was consistent with his twelve values. The thirteenth value, humility, was the one his friend suggested, and while it may have been a strong value for his friend, it was not one that Ben was able to claim.

I’m not sure how Ben Franklin defined humility, or what it took to measure up to his standards, but I believe that humility has to do with clarity about where you fit in the greater scheme of things, an understanding that your accomplishments are not “all about you.” When I think of humility, I see it as related to gratitude. When we have an attitude that people should allow us to do what we do because of our significant knowledge and skill, I see that as arrogant.

But true humility is not about diminishing yourself. ***Instead of hiding your light, can you give yourself permission to let your light shine, and***

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be grateful for the difference you are able to make in the world? Can you feel gratitude for the character qualities you exhibit, the experiences you have had, the gifts and talents you have developed, and the trust your patients give you when they put themselves in your hands for care?

The profession of dentistry provides us with opportunities to make a difference in the world every day. When I take the time to reflect, I have a profound sense of gratitude for those opportunities. I am grateful for the stories I hear about how my work affects the professional and personal lives of my clients, about the ripple effect of that on the lives of their patients and their families. I am grateful for those who have come before me and for those who will pass on to others what they learn from me. I am grateful to be part of this profession and proud of the difference we make in the world.

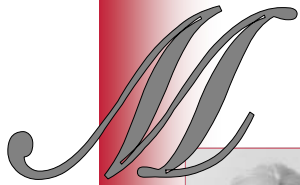
Classic & Current Resources

My work is influenced and informed by the wisdom of past as well as emerging new thinking. The following is a list of some of the sources I referred to while writing this issue of *Practice Renewal*:

American Heritage Dictionary

***Successful Preventative Dental Practices*
by Bob Barkley**

***Soar with Your Strengths*
by Don Clifton**



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Meaning, Mission & Marketing

1. What are three elements of your work that you enjoy doing for their own sake?
 - ◆ What are the things you do that provide you with a sense of satisfaction which others may not understand?
 - ◆ What rewards do you get from your work that you would want to find a way to continue to enjoy if you, for example, won the lottery?
 - ◆ What are the parts of your work you would miss if you were retired?
2. What are all of the ways in which you want to make a positive difference in the lives of others?
3. If one of your new patients went back to work after her appointment, what would you hope she would say to coworkers about her experience? How would she describe the impact the visit had had on her?
4. What are some of the things that make you and your practice unique that patients may not know about? Look for opportunities to communicate those unique characteristics to your patients in one-on-one conversations.
5. Which of your practice's promotional materials are you most proud of and why? What's missing from these materials that you would like to have communicated to your patients and potential patients?
6. Share several detailed stories that describe the impact you have had on specific patients. Talk about this as a team and notice the positive energy the group feels. Then look for opportunities to share those stories with your patients when appropriate.