



The Power of Questions

By Janet and Lawrence Steward, MBA

Based on our national research last summer, many dentists are placing too much emphasis on increasing patient's dental IQ while underestimating the power of treating patients as unique individuals. The "problem" with the common approach is that it assumes that patients are coming to your practice because they just want their teeth fixed. Naturally, some patients do, but most want more. They want relationships with professionals they know and trust.

Many corporations and business researchers have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and years of their time studying the question of how their businesses can improve their customer relationships with their customers.

The simple response, in spite of all that research, time, money, and volumes of reports and articles, can be condensed into two concepts: (1) ask questions that engage and (2) listen to the answers.

In fact, the art of asking questions is clearly the most powerful tool in creating personal and professional relationships. Of course, it does little good to ask questions if you don't listen to the answers, so it's obvious the two go hand in hand.

So how can you use the power of questions and active listening skills to improve your relationships and success as a dental practice owner?

We start by explaining two types of questions which are important in dentistry: transactional and relationship builders. The transactional question is used to gain basic but important clinical information. These seek specific responses and often can be answered with yes, no, or with a single word or phrase. These are questions typically asked of new patients, such as "are your teeth sensitive to hot or cold?" Most dentist practices do a very respectable job at asking transactional questions. While essential, be aware that they do not create patient bonds.

While transactional questions don't build patient relationships, the second category of questions are the powerful tools that spark patient-doctor bonds. Relationship questions are patient centered and designed to get to know the patient as a person. Good relationship questions can't be answered with a simple yes or no because they're designed to engage the patient in conversations about themselves.

Unless you ask, it's unlikely you'll learn the fact a patient has just received a new promotion at work, has written a book, has a new baby, or is a new grandparent.



When the dental team or doctor are talking about Dental IQ before they have established a relationship, patients are filtering comments through WIT-FM (What's In This For Me? or asking themselves "how much is this going to cost me this time?"). More importantly, the dental team is still in the transactional mode instead of capitalizing on an opportunity to engage patients. Sure, patients want a great dentist, but to them that means a dentist who's good clinically AND one that understands and cares about them.

Successful dentists build relationships for obvious reasons: they want to know more about their patients, but very often amazing things happen that benefit their practices as well. For example, by asking an older patient about his life, the dentist learns this patient has a huge extended family and they're all sad because their current family dentist is retiring at the end of the month and has been unable to find anyone to take over her practice. Because you took the time to get to know the patriarch of the family and created that critical relationship, you are now going to benefit from three dozen new patients in one day, and it didn't cost you a cent in external marketing! You won't know unless you ask questions and then listen to the responses!

Once the dentist has established a personal relationship, it's appropriate to move on to such issues as clinical history and experience, goals for their own or families' dental health, and any current financial concerns they might have. (Remember, nearly everyone feels broke today, but most feel optimistic about their ability to afford important purchases at some time in the future. Even when patients have huge financial obstacles to treatment acceptance today, establishing a bond with them ensures that, when they're ready, they'll come to you.

So what questions seem to get the best results? While professional trainers advocate scripting and rehearsing to gain confidence and clarity, they strongly caution against memorization or canned speeches. Memorized scripts most often sound stilted and may make your team sound like automatons or, worse yet, used car salespeople.

The best approaches are well rehearsed but very conversational and natural. For example, one doctor might start the conversation with a new patient by saying something similar to this after introductions: "One of the things I like to do in my practice is spend a little time with you as a patient just so I can get to know you better. So what's happening in your life?" Further questions then seem natural and are based on patients' responses.

When these questions are skillfully used and the doctor uses active listening skills, a transformation is taking place within patients. Suddenly, instead of being asked for passive information, they are being engaged. Somewhere inside the patient's brain the message is sinking in: "this doctor really cares enough about me to find out about my life and what's important to me and my family and friends."

There is a time tested and true analogy that patients won't care about what you have to say until they know you care about them.



Janet and Lawrence Steward ♦ 2768 Canby Way, Fort Collins, CO 80525 ♦ (970) 207-0776 ♦ www.themanagedentpros.com

Through the use of active listening skills, doctors are not using manipulation or other tricks just to sell something: they are genuinely interested.

For those dentists who feel they, too, are not creating strong relationships with their patients, few skills are more easily acquired than asking great questions and then actively listening. Despite their simplicity, relationship questions provide dramatic returns by creating lasting bonds with patients as real people who like to create relationships.

Janet and Lawrence Steward are speakers, consultants and authors. Their book, *What Do Dentists Really Want?* is available through Amazon.com or www.theManageDentPros.Com. Janet Steward, president of Quantum Leap Dental Consulting, can be reached at 970/207-0776.