

Puget Sound Business Journal Article

Dentists say freebies, spa services help them compete

By Ari Kramer

Puget Sound Business Journal, May 9-15, 2003

His staff is small. His lobby is luxurious. And then there are his generous freebies. From its size to its style, Seattle dentist Brian McKay's current downtown practice couldn't differ more from the North Seattle practice he ran from 1983-1998. And he says it's no coincidence that his prospects have never appeared brighter.

For nearly five years, McKay has employed a combination of complimentary whitening services and a casual sitting-room ambiance to attract new patients and keep existing ones. And while his marketing plan has required no small front-end investment, McKay says his patients are no the only ones left with a reason to smile.

"I went from nothing in 1998 to an office grossing \$1.5 million by the end of the third year," says McKay, of Advanced Cosmetic and Laser Dentistry. "The difference has been breathtaking. There's no comparison."

An increasing number of dentists in Seattle and across the country are employing the two-pronged approach of free services and serene settings to retain existing customers and attract new ones. Often enticed by free whitening services - which alone can cost hundreds of dollars - visitors to McKay's cosmetic dentistry practice pass through French doors into a softly lit office with aromatherapy candles, plush armchairs and complimentary Tully's coffee.

Indeed, while amenities and marketing plans differ by practice, McKay's investments come as whitening is becoming a staple even in general dentistry - and as thousands of cosmetic practices are becoming akin to "day spas," said Tracy Skenandore, coordinator of the Minnesota-based American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry's Journal of Cosmetic Dentistry. The AACD represents 5200 cosmetic dentistry practices nationwide. "I'd say the majority of our members are seeking to do that in some way, shape or form," she said.

Meanwhile, whitening services surpassed periodontal, veneer/bonding and restorative dentistry as the fastest-growing service for thousands of dentists and hygienists from 1998 to 2002, according to the latest American Dental Association/Colgate Oral Health Trend Survey, prepared by Pathfinder Research Group, Inc.

"There's no better way to bring people who are appearance-oriented into an office that focuses on aesthetic dentistry," McKay says. Unlike general dentistry, cosmetic dentistry is typically not covered by insurance.

In his old practice, McKay says he offered a "new-patient special" of cleaning, X-rays, and an oral exam for \$19. While the offer generated new business, he says it did little to boost retention. McKay says new and existing patients now receive complimentary tooth molds and the latest

bleaching gels. And for a roster of approximately 600 patients, he says that retention is now above 80 percent - and more than 80 percent take advantage of the free whitening service.

He also attributes the retention to his practice's style: McKay says his previous practice had 18 employees and a "conventional," if not clinical, dental atmosphere. The current one has an intimate staff consisting of one dentist, one hygienist and a few administrative staff. Patients wait in luxury and are offered paraffin wax treatments, neck pillows, and free beverages.

Such amenities are becoming more common, says Dana Ackley, a consultant with dental practices and guest presenter at the Pankey Institute, a dental school and resource center in Key Biscayne, Fla. A psychologist by training, Ackley says many patients also seek cosmetic and general dentists who take time to discuss patients' dental history and goals.

"Dentists are trying to get people to change their behavior, and most are behaviors that people don't want to change," he says. "Anything a dentist can do to enhance the quality of the relationship will keep people coming back. There's a lot of pressure to get away from quality and not take time with the patients, but that comes back to bite you. And it's scary, but most dentists don't do this."

Seattle general and cosmetic dentist Linda Johnson offers first-time patients either a complimentary whitening kit or electronic toothbrush - retail values of approximately \$200 and \$100, respectively. But Johnson's business administrator, Val Parker, says the practice's bottom line is served most generously by its Care to Share program. If a patient recruits a new patient and the new patient signs a Care to Share card, both receive a \$25 discount on future service. "It's our best and most inexpensive program by far," Parker says. "The only cost is printing the card. This brings in long-term patients."

In the opinion of Bellevue cosmetic dentist Lynn Jones, dentists need not offer complimentary whitening or similar perks to survive. To boost retention and recruitment, she offers spa-type ambiance and services - and good, old-fashioned pain free care. Want a good reputation as a practice? Spread the word that your waiting times are short and your procedures don't hurt (at least, not too much.) That's what Jones has tried to do. Six years into her practice, she says referrals generate 90 percent of her business. "That's the No. 1 thing you can do to make it a good experience," she says.