

You Carefully Select Materials and Tech, Now Be Mindful of Word Choice

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Words matter. Healthcare communications and marketing embody the importance and power of word choice. We generally encourage aligning marketing communications with how you engage with your patients during appointments. So, it is also advised to revisit how you [communicate with patients](#) in the first place, especially when using such authentic and helpful word choice and content as the foundation or basis for marketing collateral.

With strong fundamentals in place, you can efficiently translate communication in the treatment room to your website, videos, podcasts, and social platforms. Additionally, careful attention to word choice and how you communicate those words can either engender or hinder trust and confidence and other qualities that support the sustained success of dental practices.

Habits of highly successful clinician-communicators

As our day-to-day work becomes second nature, we can fall into negative behaviours. Regularly taking a step back to assess the basic functions of our jobs and practices keeps

things fresh, provides much-needed perspective, and squashes adverse habits before they damage sound reputations. When reviewing how you communicate with patients at every engagement, be mindful of the following:

- **Your “common language”** – Do you tend to fall back on dental terms? While references to everything from *calculus* and *composites* to *periodontitis* and *prophylaxis* roll off your tongue, they may as well be “Greek” to the general layperson. **Simplify**. Instead of referring to specific technical materials’ terms, highlight what these materials actually *do*. So, composite then becomes a “material to fix tooth decay.” Or, periodontitis becomes “what happens when gum disease is not treated.”
- **The pictures you create with your words** – Word pictures are invaluable. Here, analogies are helpful. For example, when meeting with patients in need of orthodontic treatment, you could compare bite problems to vehicles in need of alignment services, how adjusting the angles of the tires affects the contact they make with the road, similarly to how orthodontic adjustments affect the contact between the opposing upper and lower teeth when biting down.
- **Think: precision** – Use the same precision that makes you such an exceptional clinician when educating and empowering patients with credible information. An example is the use of the word “**yet**.” Just one simple word can mean so much. It can instill unnecessary fear in the patient. A big difference exists between asking in a follow-up appointment, “Does that feel tender, yet?” versus “Does that feel tender?” A patient that was not worried may now, in response to the former example, be fixated on “Oh, no! This is SUPPOSED to be painful. It just has not started to hurt ... *yet*.”
- **Avoid triggers** – To piggyback off of the above scenario, it is essential to remember those triggers or sources of dental fear and apprehension among your patients. Omit these triggering words from your vocabulary. For instance, “tender” is undoubtedly a better option than “hurt” or “pain.” It just sounds better. However, it still conveys a sense of discomfort. Instead, play up the positives – the notion of progress, improvement, healing, health, rejuvenation, and restoration. Other triggering terms to avoid include “shots,” “needles,” “drilling,” “blood,” “swelling,” and “numbness.” Such analyses of word choice may even lead you to analyze how specific procedures are performed in the first place and to consider **alternatives** to triggering dental instruments, techniques, and practice features!
- **Summarize** – When educating on everything from home care to treatment options, a good rule of thumb is to sum up all that was discussed concisely. This approach demonstrates: 1.) How well you listened. After all, you are including high points of your *conversation* with the patient, which is a two-way street, 2.) How much you care about the patient’s *understanding* of proper hygiene, treatment alternatives, etc., and

3.) Your unhurried attention and personalized approach. Your patients are not “just” a number or a set of teeth. They are one-of-a-kind individuals that demand quality time and genuine understanding and appreciation of their needs and preferences.

Use your “helpers”!

What may be difficult to communicate clearly to the layperson in words can be conveyed properly and learned with technologies. Let the technology do the talking! After all, clear communication is ultimately about *illustrating* and *showing*. That is why we reference using words to create pictures. Well, advanced software, for instance, renders actual pictures. In some ways, patients can “try before they buy” with 3-D modelling [technologies](#) that simulate treatment processes. Patients can see what their goal smile looks like before the first aligner tray is made or before the first procedure in a smile makeover is scheduled. So, technology can be a big selling point that endears the patient to you and can then be translated over to and promoted in your marketing communications.

Let’s not forget our “craft” and its power – a smile truly says 1,000 words. When talking about the *how* and not necessarily the *what* of the communication, we are referring to those visual or other subtle [cues](#) that speak volumes. It does not hurt to role model or to have your staff practice how they engage with patients. When going over reminders about content or word choice, it may be beneficial to also role-play in-person visits to get a sense of what is being expressed or conveyed without saying a word. Assess for:

- **If facial expressions align with what is being said** – *Are you or your team members betraying their frustration with patients through a scowl or furrowed brow? Or is your frustration over a particularly bad day being conveyed, unbeknownst to you, through your face?* It is always beneficial to take a deep breath and talk yourself up a bit before meeting with patients, especially if you are having a particularly challenging day. Smile, no matter what. You would be surprised how much that simple act can improve your mood, no less because of the positive response that you get back from the patient.
- **Positive posture** – No matter how cold or tired you may be, refrain from folding your arms or slumping in your chair. To the former point, the position of your arms sends a message. Crossed arms suggest an unfriendly nature and even that you are “closed-off” to the other person. Of course, this is not the case. Again, these are subtle cues that we, as humans, universally tend to attribute to certain personality traits or qualities. Instead, use gestures that convey welcoming and openness. For instance, when speaking with the patient, lean in and gesture with your arms toward the patient as appropriate. If you find it difficult to not cross your arms when listening to patients,

hold a pen or paper in your hands instead. Just be sure not to fidget too much, as that can be distracting and does not instill confidence in patients.

- **Overall body language** – The big takeaway when it comes to assessing for and improving patient communications of all types is to develop trust and rapport. When it comes to language, that involves things like asking clarifying questions and demonstrating good listening techniques at every turn. You can also demonstrate good listening techniques with everything from your eye contact to your “mirroring” of the patients’ behaviours. Be aware of any shifting eyes, as well as a gaze that might be held too long and can be off-putting. If patients tend to talk with their hands, acknowledge that and do the same. This approach is not about being inauthentic or manipulative to advance your “cause” (building a loyal patient base). Rather, noticing and harnessing patient habits in our own behaviours generates a familiarity and comfort deep within our consciousness.

We appreciate that you are rightfully “choosy” about the materials you use. The staff you employ. The lab you select. So, be as equally selective and mindful about the words you use when partnering with patients and other ways that you may convey those words and information. After all, the crème de la crème of any profession is very good at one essential ingredient of fruitful relationships: consistently effective and healthy communication.

About the Author:



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