Let’s face it. If you are like most of the dentists I’ve known and worked with in my career, you didn’t go to dental school because you wanted to sell dental services. After all, selling involves being pushy and practically begging people to part with their money, right? Oh, how wrong that is. Selling, when done properly, involves education, motivation and a little bit of fun.

Selling has received a bad rap for hundreds of years because there are pushy people in the world of selling. There are those who match the Hollywood stereotype of being unscrupulous, ruthless and downright scheming. It’s the bane of those who choose professional selling as a career. And it has probably negatively impacted your thinking – keeping you from using proven-effective selling strategies and tactics with your patients (even though you really are in sales).

Think about it. When was the last time you suggested a new restaurant for lunch or dinner to friends or associates? Did you ask them if they’ve ever heard of the place? Did you tell them about your experience there? Did you suggest they would also have a great experience there? Were you smiling and looking them in the eyes as you spoke? If you did any of those things, then you were selling.

Everyone is in sales. We all sell ourselves daily to our loved ones, friends and business associates. We sell our values to our children. And we sell what we believe in.
You believe in the value and benefits of professional dental services. And, when you know of something that can make a powerful, positive difference in the lives of others it’s your obligation to share it with them, to educate them and to sell them.

Your ability to educate others about how much better their lives will be with proper dental care will make a huge difference in your job satisfaction, the size of your practice and the income you generate each year. If it will make that much of a difference in your life and the lives of the patients you profess to care about, why not learn how to do it better?

You don’t need to become a loud, pushy extrovert to sell dental services. In fact, introverts tend to make higher incomes in selling in general. That’s because rather than shouting about their services from the rooftops, they ask questions to get the potential patients talking about their concerns, their lifestyles and their expectations. Then, with that information, expert dental advisors (salespeople) present the benefits of their services in such a way as to address all of the concerns the patients have expressed; making the “purchase” of additional dental services just a natural result of the process.

Done properly, it’s not awkward. It’s not demanding. It doesn’t demean the patients if they choose not to go ahead at this time. It’s just you and your staff being proactively helpful, but relying on a proven selling process to get results.

Yes, selling is a process. As with any process, it has multiple measurable steps that should be followed in a particular order if you want to have the best outcome. The process goes like this:

1. **Prospecting**
   These are the methods you use to find new patients. They primarily include your marketing efforts and the system you use for getting referrals. And, yes, there is a system for getting referrals, too (see 7).

2. **Initial Contact**
   This is all about the first impression your practice, staff and you make with the patients. This includes everything: your location, the cleanliness of the parking lot, the ease of entrance to your lobby, the colors, posters and paintings on the wall, the comfort of the chairs, what (if anything) is showing on the television, whether there is a partition between your front desk staff and the patients, the font size on the forms you use, the length of time in the waiting area, and how patients are greeted and spoken to while being escorted to the operatory. Then, the whole atmosphere of the operatory makes another impression – everything from the colors and the curtains on the window to the lighting.

3. **Qualification**
   This is where you get to know the patients. What health issues do they have? Are there specific dental issues that brought them in? What would they like to have changed about their current dental state? Are they the final decision-maker? Or is there a parent or spouse to consult with? This is also the step in which you make your analysis by reviewing X-rays and doing a physical examination of their mouth.

   A very important part of this step that is overlooked by most is to assure the patients that you have the ability to find just the right solution for their needs. They’ve poured their hearts out by answering all of your questions. They need reassurance that they’ve come to the right place for answers.

4. **Presentation**
   Now, you are presenting the services you feel would provide them with the greatest benefit. Always remember the presentation of services must be based on the information the patients provided during qualification. It must be customized for them. When they feel you’re talking specifically about their needs, not general dental practice, they start to envision themselves enjoying the benefits you offer. They begin taking ownership of the process required to achieve those results. In other words,
their level of sales acceptance is inching upward, toward making the “buying” decision, the commitment to the services.

5. Addressing Concerns

Few patients will ever say, “Sure, doc, whatever you say. Let me run up front and schedule all that work now.” Objecting to something is a natural defense mechanism we all employ when we experience fear. Usually, the patients’ fear is just that they feel compelled to commit to the services and just want to slow down the process.

Don’t fear objections or concerns that are raised. In most cases, they are nothing more than requests for additional information. When you view them that way, you will be better prepared for objections and be able to come across as a professional consultant, not a pushy salesperson.

The most important thing to remember in this stage of selling is not to jump right in with a quick answer. That reeks of “pushy-ness.” Even if you’ve heard the concern a thousand times, take a thoughtful pause before answering. Even better, ask a question about the concern before answering it. Try something like this: “Is that the only thing holding you back from committing to the procedure?” As you well know, some people have a whole string of concerns and objections when they learn that they need more than their regularly scheduled cleanings. You want to get them all out in the open before answering anything. Some patients will start with an objection about how soon you feel they should have the procedure done, but end up with the real concern of not being able to rationalize spending the money for it. By asking that one simple question, you give them the opportunity to voice everything they’re feeling about your recommendation, opening up the opportunity for further discussion or explanation. When all of their answers are confirmed, they will feel more comfortable about making a decision that is good for them.

6. Closing the Sale

This is the most important step of all, but the most feared by dentists and their staff members. That’s because they’re asking people to hand over their money. Did you notice how that phrase felt? “Hand over their money”? It makes the person asking sound a little like a bank robber or a mugger doesn’t it? It’s no wonder people have a negative image of selling!

What’s really happening is that the patient has agreed that the benefit of professional dental services outweighs the value of using their money for other goods and services. Now, it’s just a matter of how they want to handle that transaction. The simplest, least-fearful way of asking is to say these words: “How would you like to handle your fees today? Cash, check or credit card?” It can be treated matter-of-factly like that and no one will take offense to it.

Of course, there are situations where the cliché of the patients’ “eyeballs are bigger than their stomachs” apply, meaning they want all the services, but simply don’t have the budget for them. That’s when you would apply sales strategies that help them rationalize investing money in their mouths and figuring out where that money can come from. Once you know the strategies, it’s just a matter of using the one that’s best for each patient’s situation – just like you would provide a specific recommended treatment for each patient’s needs.

7. Getting Referrals

Most dental practices have this step of the sales process in place in some way or another. The true skill is in helping patients come up with the names and contact information for those potential new patients. There are simple steps within this step of the selling process that, when properly applied, will get you at least five referrals from every patient. And for most patients you already have the information you need to use this strategy effectively just from the conversations you’ve had with them.

There you have an outline of the seven steps of the selling process. It might seem like a lot of information but that’s because effective selling involves a myriad of nuances. You don’t want to go overboard and stress over this. However, every nuance that works to the positive with your patients will move them one step closer to becoming a lifetime patient, having all the recommended services done and helping you grow your practice with referrals.
As you well know, people have thousands of reasons to avoid coming to you. Some will make any excuse to stop visiting the dentist at all or to switching dentists many times over their lifetimes for what seems to you to be petty matters. The important thing to remember is that those matters aren't petty to them.

The most basic key to having a successful dental practice is to learn how to help people like you, trust you and want to listen to you. This happens when they have a positive experience from the moment they pull into your parking lot to the moment they walk back out to their cars. During this entire process, assume they are daring you to make them feel better about themselves because of knowing you. And through the use of simple, yet effective, selling strategies you can make that happen more times than not.

You invest hundreds of hours in educating yourself and developing your treatment skills. Why not include a bit of sales process training in the mix so you can use those skills to help more patients?

Author’s Bio

Tom Hopkins is a world-renowned expert and authority on selling and salesmanship. His simple, yet powerful strategies have been proven effective in many industries including the dental industry and during all types of economic cycles. The foundation of his training includes both the “people skills” of proper communication and the nuances that impact every situation where you are trying to persuade others. Tom’s style of delivery is practical and entertaining – making the strategies easy to remember and implement. Learn more about how Tom Hopkins can help you increase revenues in your practice at www.tomhopkins.com/blog.

Tom’s Three-day Boot Camp Sales Mastery will be held August 23, 24 & 25 in Scottsdale. Information can be found at: www.tomhopkins.com/boot_camp.shtml. Details about Tom’s speaking schedule can be found at www.tomhopkins.com/live_events.shtml.