



A millennial researcher explains how to respect her generation's quirks and characteristics, and connect with these potential patients

by Katrina Sanders

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It was an unusual Saturday morning—and by “unusual,” I mean both my doctor and I had enough downtime to casually sit across from each other in our break room and enjoy a few intermittent sips of instant coffee. During these rare moments, we catch up on our favorite hair products, *The Walking Dead* and new restaurant openings, but on this particular break my doctor seemed curious and wanted my input. “How do I motivate millennial patients to get their prescribed treatment done?” she asked.

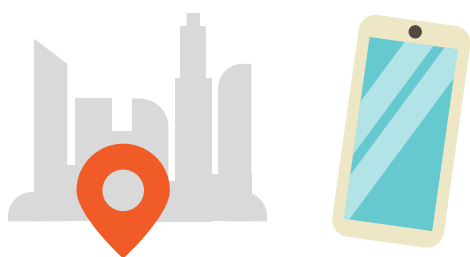


Let me take a step back: I work as a hygienist in clinical practice a day or so a week, and in the sporadic days I spent at the practice it hadn't occurred to me that there was a growing issue of patient compliance, especially among a specific patient population. As a full-time dental hygiene educator, I use noncompliant patient experiences as a learning opportunity for my students; we use measurement scales such as the Health Belief Model, the Stages of the Learning Ladder or Dental IQ as means of understanding a patient's involvement to his or her perceived belief of disease and subsequent compliance. What I've learned, however, is that millennials don't fit perfectly into an archetypal model.

To earn my master's degree in educational leadership I had analyzed, written and evaluated many articles on the enigma of the millennial. I myself am considered a millennial—albeit an older one, without the helicopter childhood and Peter Pan syndrome. The term *millennial*, defined by William Strauss and Neil Howe in their generation cycle of American history, typically describes a person born between 1983 and 1997 who displays these basic traits: sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured and believing oneself to be special. Moreover, research has identified specific tendencies associated with millennials based on their experiences.

Millennials watched their boomer parents reach milestones such as marriage and tenured employment—and then watched them divorce, and work begrudgingly for corporations where they were unappreciated and subsequently unhappy. As a result, millennials wait longer to get married, seek frequent opportunities for new jobs and are blamed for creating perhaps the lowest birth rate in history. Millennials borrowed exorbitant amounts of money for higher education and graduated with college degrees during the Great Recession. All these experiences shaped an eclectic generation of technologically savvy, engagement-oriented, pragmatic, diverse and progressive people.

With a deep breath (and one more sip of coffee), I began to dive into the major qualities of millennials that drive their decision-making.



1 Millennials are engagement-minded.

Millennials share a common sense of community and seek engagement within organizations that promote and encourage the same values of their social needs.

Let me provide an example: When my boyfriend and I make plans for an upscale date night, we go to our favorite restaurant. When we walk in, the host welcomes us back, we're greeted by wait staff who know our names and we order our favorite cocktails just by casually nodding when our server asks, "The usual?" My boyfriend absolutely

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could enjoy the same single-malt scotch at home, for about one-eighth of the price, but then we wouldn't feel like celebrities on the red carpet.

Millennials want to live their life in the Cheers bar, and appreciate feeling like they matter. If your office has an indifferent front desk receptionist who points to a "sign in here" clipboard when your millennial patients walk in, it's a good bet things aren't off to a good start. Your millennial patients want to be greeted by name, they want to be quoted on your website, they want to be asked about their recent humanitarian trip to Guatemala or how their pet snake is doing, and if they no-show their appointment they want to know that they were missed. What can I say? Feeling important is our love language.

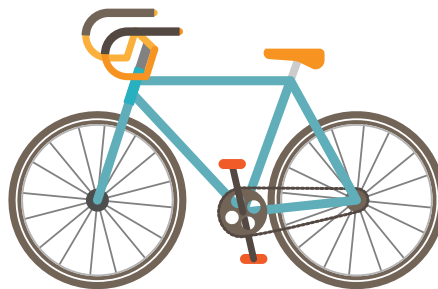


2 Millennials are curious.

This generation uses the technology at their fingertips to become invested in their many interests. When my younger brother wanted to buy a new car, he researched all makes, models and colors in his target price range as if he were writing a thesis on it. It took me six months of Instagram stalking before I comfortably switched hairstylists, and I'd never dream of eating at a new restaurant without combing through at least a few dozen Yelp reviews.

We millennials want to know the ins and outs of anything we spend our money on, and this means we need to believe in what we're purchasing. The baby boomer generation, which believed anything their doctor said, permitted health care providers to simply diagnose and deliver the needed care. Millennials, however, are curious and informed and want to be involved in the provision of their care.

Dental professionals need to adjust their care-planning style to accommodate a dialogue with this cohort of patients. Co-discovery works well with millennials, because they become part of the solution to their own dental needs. Additionally, providing reliable, evidence-based resources to millennial patients will entertain their need for awareness.



3 Millennials are practical.

Millennials blame the Great Recession for the perpetual fiscal responsibility we feel. In the age of Airbnb and LivingSocial, millennials have become financially meticulous. We grew up camping outside Best Buy on Black Friday, illegally downloading songs on Napster and getting free Pizza Hut for reading books.

By and large, if a millennial patient has come to your office through a Groupon, you



should anticipate that he or she has sought, and wants, *the deal*. In addition, this patient is aware that there may be a “catch”—expect a giant eye roll when you tell this patient that a \$50 Groupon for an FMX, comp exam and “free cleaning” doesn’t cover the four quads of scaling and root planing needed, and that Susan will be back shortly to go over the out-of-pocket fees for this treatment that, once Googled (see previous section,) yields many sources saying SRPs are a ploy to get money from patients.

Disclaimer: Some patients truly want just their free cleaning and that’s it. Others, however, have sought out your office because they don’t have a “dental home,” and they’ll respond to your office manager if she, in some way, honors the fiscal responsibility of your periodontally involved millennial.

Let’s assume your practically periodontal patient in every way truly understands their need for SRPs—his girlfriend complains about his perio breath, the tissues bleed just by looking at them, and he has those perfect radiographic triangles of calculus.

Most millennials will respond in one of three ways:

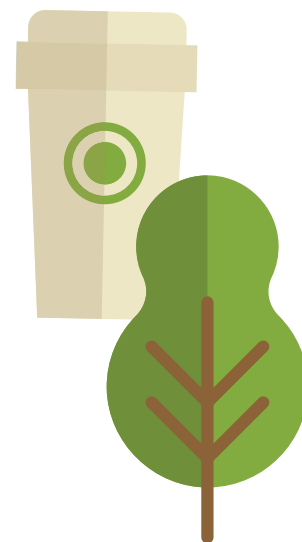
1. They get the treatment completed but might need several monthly payments broken up over an extended period. These are patients who will likely become tenured patients of your practice (and a great referral source).
2. They seek an office that provides the same service but will offer a deeper discount.
3. They demand that they receive their prophylaxis.

At this point, it’s important to understand what your office’s bottom line is: In the latter two scenarios, these patients are not only dictating their treatment but also may expect severe discounts for all future work (and this is assuming they remain patients of the practice). In my experience, these patients can often become professional liabilities, and may not be the investment that you and your doctor had in mind when bringing new patients on board.

As my doctor and I discussed these details and finished our coffee, the next patient had arrived. This patient—coincidentally, a millennial—warned that he hadn’t had his teeth cleaned in more than a decade, had a history of poor dental care and, most importantly, he wasn’t interested in paying anything out of pocket for procedures. By the end of his appointment, I had completed a half-mouth scaling and root planing that day, and he presented recently for Invisalign impressions.

How did we do it? Through thorough assessments, an invested interest in the patient, co-discovery techniques and the use of intraoral photographs and transillumination techniques, the doctor and I were able to deliver a comprehensive treatment plan involving complex care to a patient who was ready to follow through with his treatment recommendations.

Millennials can be a mystery, but with the proper attention to the details presented in this article and an open-arms approach to this particular type of patient’s wants and needs, your office can achieve the same level of success with patient acceptance. ■



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