

# Promoting Esthetic Procedures in the Prosthodontic Practice

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The demand for esthetic services is large and growing. Emphasis on enhancing personal appearance is demonstrated in patients' increased demands for elective esthetic procedures. The techniques that have fueled this Esthetic Cultural Revolution fall under the expertise of prosthodontists. Prosthodontists, therefore, are in a position to establish themselves as the most qualified providers of these services. Prosthodontists must leverage their technical and treatment planning strengths with effective marketing strategies to address the esthetic expectations of today's patients. Marketing techniques with specific relevance to prosthodontists and esthetic dentistry are detailed.

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**INDEX WORDS:** prosthodontist, marketing, baby boomer, referral, hierarchy, self-esteem, promotion, brand, public relations, advertising

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**A**N ESTHETIC REVOLUTION is occurring in the dental profession.<sup>1</sup> Historically, dentistry was considered strictly a health profession, focused on the alleviation of pain, and evolved to include restoration of function. Since the 1980s, the profession has progressed to encompass elective esthetically oriented procedures.<sup>2</sup> Dentists are somewhat apprehensive within this new domain of appearance enhancement<sup>3</sup> as their careers evolve into a hybrid of health and elective cosmetic services.<sup>4</sup>

The specialty of prosthodontics is similarly undergoing a transition, attempting to redefine itself in this ever-evolving dental marketplace. Traditionally, prosthodontists have been largely regarded as providers of technology rather than therapy.<sup>5</sup> Although prosthodontists replace and restore teeth, they ultimately enhance appearance, improve smiles, restore function, and raise self-esteem. Prosthodontists must learn not only to be comfortable in delivering esthetic treatment to their patients, but must embrace it, quite possibly to ensure the future of the specialty. Now is the

time for prosthodontists to establish their niche as the specialists most qualified to restore smiles and enhance personal appearance.

This article explores the esthetic need in dentistry, the role of prosthodontists in meeting the demand for esthetic dentistry, and specifically how prosthodontists can promote their specialty and themselves as the providers of esthetic dental services.

## The Esthetic Need

The psychological significance of esthetic dentistry can be illustrated by Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Maslow, the founder of humanistic psychology, hypothesized that individuals cannot progress to a higher level of human needs until their more basic needs are fulfilled.<sup>6</sup> According to Maslow, individuals must satisfy their physiological, safety, and social needs before they are prepared to realize esteem needs and, ultimately, self-actualization. By prioritizing dental needs into a similar hierarchical model, dentists may better understand their patients' motivations to seek dental care (Fig 1). Foremost, patients must be comfortable and free of dental disease. Upon meeting this need, patients are then motivated to fulfill their functional requirements before progressing to esthetic considerations. Once their esthetic needs are met, patients may realize a higher level of self-esteem.

Dental treatment may motivate patients on one, multiple, or all levels within the hierarchy of

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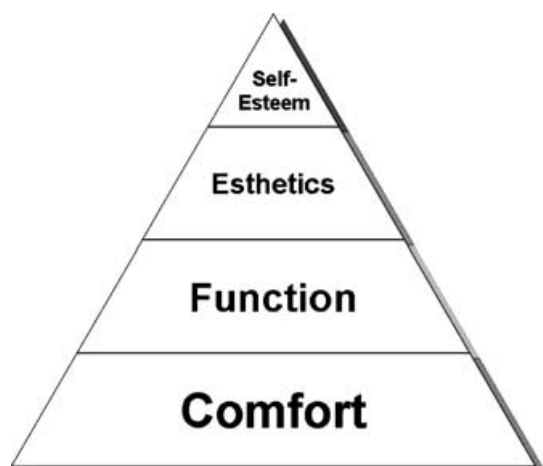
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**Figure 1.** Priest's hierarchy of dental needs.

dental needs. Examples of dentistry performed to satisfy only one level of need include: endodontic treatment that provides comfort for an abscessed tooth; an implant replacement for a maxillary second molar to restore functional integrity; or ceramic veneers that enhance dental esthetics of worn teeth. Many procedures performed by prosthodontists, including denture therapy, fulfill multiple dental needs, and demonstrate the progressive nature of the hierarchy. During the denture adjustment phase, the patient focuses on areas of irritation. After the pain is alleviated, and the patient is functionally satisfied, apprehensions about the esthetic results often arise. Once the prosthodontist has provided an acceptable esthetic outcome, the patient may experience improved self-esteem. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, this type of behavior is a predictable human characteristic.

Patzner noted that, "The mouth is critical to a person's physical attractiveness and improvements to the oral region yield a notable impact on self-esteem."<sup>7</sup> In a review of 118 articles, Elias and Sheiham noted that, even though more posterior teeth are missing than anterior teeth, more anterior teeth are replaced.<sup>8</sup> They concluded that there is a discrepancy between dentists' and patients' definitions of oral health. Often, dentists have been preoccupied with the minimal functional increase gained by single posterior tooth replacement and less attentive to the significant esthetic and emotional consequences of anterior tooth loss. Dentists must not compromise the more basic needs of comfort and function to satisfy a patient's pursuit of improved esthetics.

Satisfaction of an esthetic need itself is not the patient's ultimate goal. Instead, it is a means for fulfilling significant emotional needs. An attractive smile conveys social implications beyond the oral cavity. Patients do not particularly want dental implants, dentures, ceramic crowns, ceramic veneers, or fixed partial dentures. Dental providers must, therefore, appeal to higher emotional needs such as youth, appearance, security, self-esteem, confidence, and sexual appeal.

The largest target market fueling the demand for esthetic services is aging baby boomers. This group of people, from 39 to 57 years of age, makes up nearly 40% of the population and is the most restored generation in history.<sup>9</sup> Baby boomers view an improved smile as a means to recapture their youthful appearance. Many advertisements in consumer-oriented magazines target esthetic enhancement for baby boomers. From plastic and reconstructive surgery, to dermatology and esthetic dentistry, medical and dental professionals are capitalizing on this population's desire to appear and feel more youthful. In addition, this affluent group has the discretionary income to pay for elective esthetic care.<sup>10</sup>

The dental visionary, Irwin Mandel, has said, "A perfect smile is rapidly becoming the American icon...the hallmark of an affluent society."<sup>11</sup> The increase in discretionary income and the elevated demand for esthetic enhancement are shifting dentistry from purely a health profession to one of health and elective esthetic services. The significant growth of esthetic dental procedures is reflective of this trend.<sup>12</sup> Dentists will continue to experience a growing demand for their services for the next 20 years, largely related to patients' desires for better-looking smiles.<sup>1</sup>

### **Prosthodontics and Satisfying the Esthetic Need**

Prosthodontists cannot ignore the increasing demand for elective dental procedures. They must acknowledge the shifting dental perceptions of patients and appeal to the esthetic need. The advanced training of prosthodontists makes them uniquely qualified to successfully deliver esthetic services and position themselves as the primary providers of esthetic dentistry.

Prosthodontists' competitive advantages lie in two unique core competencies. Prosthodontists'

first distinctive core competency is their command of technically complex clinical procedures. Removable prosthodontics was the original niche of the specialty. Complete and partial denture therapies remain important elements of care, and both comprise significant esthetic components. However, prosthodontics now encompasses even more sophisticated means of restoration. Esthetic procedures including ceramic veneers and crowns, implant restorations, and tooth-colored inlays and onlays are the core of prosthodontic clinical competency. Prosthodontists receive intensified training in complete oral rehabilitation and perform this therapy on a regular basis. A prosthodontic reconstruction can completely alter the facial appearance of the treated patient. The techniques that have fueled the esthetic revolution clearly fall within the domain of prosthodontics.

The specialty is compelled to meet the esthetic need by developing and refining techniques that minimize biologic complications. Prosthodontists are also ethically obligated to advise their patients of any biological complications that may result from their treatment, as well as the future costs that complications and replacement might entail.<sup>13</sup> Patients can then assess the risks and benefits of elective esthetic procedures. Öwall reminds prosthodontists that the quest for dental esthetics may inflict significant biologic costs and compromise their main goal, to restore or rehabilitate inadequate function.<sup>14</sup> Some dentists may have compromised the basic dental needs of comfort and function in the pursuit of improved esthetics (Fig 1), and dentistry performed solely for esthetic enhancement could result in overtreatment. On the other hand, current techniques for elective esthetic procedures might be less traumatic than those used previously.<sup>15</sup>

The second core competency of prosthodontists is their treatment planning skills. Beginning in their residency programs, prosthodontists learn how to coordinate efforts with general dentists and other specialists. Achieving optimal esthetic outcomes often requires the involvement of several dental and even medical professionals. Because this multidisciplinary approach will be more prevalent in the future, the prosthodontist's treatment planning skills will be essential in leading the treatment team.<sup>16</sup>

Prosthodontics is a recognized ADA specialty with 2,543 active practitioners in the United

States.<sup>12</sup> Prosthodontists alone cannot meet the entire demand of patients seeking elective esthetic care. General dentists, with 123,625 active U.S. practitioners, will continue to provide a substantial percentage of elective esthetic procedures.<sup>12</sup> Prosthodontists should offer their expertise to general dentists when the complexity of the esthetic therapy warrants the treatment planning abilities and technical skills that prosthodontists possess. Prosthodontists should also include general dentists as integral members of their team.

## Prosthodontists and Esthetic Marketing

As the most qualified providers of esthetic dentistry, prosthodontists should promote their expertise to the public, other dentists, and medical professionals. Prosthodontists must leverage their treatment planning and technical strengths with effective marketing strategies to address the esthetic expectations of today's patients. These strategies may include a combination of public relations, branding, and advertising. Marketing esthetic procedures benefits prosthodontists and the specialty in several ways: (1) an expanded scope of prosthodontic services, (2) an increased patient demand for these services, (3) a larger patient base, (4) improved recognition of the specialty of prosthodontics, and ultimately, (5) survival of the specialty. To achieve these benefits, the prosthodontist must develop and execute a customized marketing plan (Table 1).

The first step in developing a marketing plan is to specifically define the goals that the prosthodontist wants to achieve. The goals should be simple to understand, relevant to esthetics,

1. Identification of marketing goals and objectives
2. Development of a Unique Selling Proposition
3. Commitment of a marketing budget and resources
4. Selection of suitable marketing techniques
5. Education of staff regarding the overall marketing plan
6. Execution of the marketing techniques
7. Tracking the success of the marketing techniques
8. Annual review of the marketing plan

**Table 1.** Marketing planning cycle.

and measurable. Potential goals include: a specific increase in (1) the number of new patients, (2) the source of esthetic referrals, (3) the number of esthetic procedures performed, and (4) the ratio of the revenue generated from esthetic procedures to the overall revenue derived from all procedures.

Every prosthodontist should possess a Unique Selling Proposition (USP).<sup>17</sup> The USP serves to answer the patient's prospective question of, "Why should I select this prosthodontist for my esthetic dental needs?" The answer to this question is critical to creating a successful brand that the patient perceives as providing unique added value that matches his or her needs. The prosthodontist's brand is associated with his or her esthetic skills, credentials, personal style, and office environment. The marketing tools used to promote the prosthodontist's esthetic services should establish and reinforce this brand identity.

The prosthodontist should allocate a budget and designate necessary resources as part of the overall marketing plan. It is advisable to begin with a relatively small budget relative to the practice's revenue and increase it over time as positive results develop. This budget will be used to cover incremental practice expenses related to the marketing plan including salaries, consulting fees, advertising costs, promotional costs, office supplies, etc. The prosthodontist must also determine if the marketing plan is to be established and executed using in-house resources or with assistance from marketing consultants.

Promotional techniques are generally divided into public relations and advertising. The following are marketing tools well suited to promoting the specialty of prosthodontics and individual practitioners.

### **Public Relations**

Public relations is a form of communication that raises public awareness through third-party endorsements. It may significantly benefit the specialty and prosthodontists individually. The House of Delegates of the American College of Prosthodontists (ACP) committed to an extensive public relations campaign in 2001. A goal of the "New Vision Campaign" was to raise public awareness of the specialty of prosthodontics.<sup>18</sup> Lloyd emphasized that prosthodontists must formulate "a descriptor that more accurately conveys what

we do and can be easily understood by the general public."<sup>19</sup> The new tag line developed for the specialty, "prosthodontics; esthetic, implant, and reconstructive dentistry," effectively serves as that descriptor.<sup>20</sup> Another tool to differentiate prosthodontics is the patient-friendly ACP slogan, "Doesn't your smile deserve a specialist's care?" This slogan articulates the competitive advantage that patients should trust prosthodontists because of their exclusive qualifications.

The ACP has also prepared a press release personalized for each ACP member to be submitted to local newspapers quoting its recent findings regarding consumer attitudes toward a healthy-looking smile. The telephone survey, conducted by Harris Interactive, reveals that as many as 61% of Americans would consider professional teeth whitening and 41% would consider other procedures, including crowns or bridges, to improve the look of their teeth.

Prosthodontists must reinforce the ACP's marketing efforts with their own public relations activities to effectively promote their individual practices. Public relations techniques with specific relevance to prosthodontists and esthetic dentistry include (1) esthetic procedures on the inner circle, (2) the power of patient referrals, (3) collaborative partnering, (4) image congruency, (5) before and after images, (6) patient education, (7) letters of recognition, and (8) credibility builders.

#### **Esthetic procedures on the inner circle**

The inner circle consists of the prosthodontist's family, friends, and employees. These are the individuals who care most about the practitioner's personal success. Referrals from the inner circle are personal and direct and should be the easiest patients to acquire. Performing esthetic procedures at reduced or no cost to members of the inner circle has tremendous marketing power. For example, patients considering esthetic procedures can personally view the high quality of the esthetic dentistry that the prosthodontist has performed on his or her employees. Employees, happy with their improved appearance, will provide testimonials to the prosthodontist's capabilities.

#### **The power of patient referrals**

Soliciting direct referrals from satisfied patients is the least costly form of dental marketing. Prosthodontists should inform their patients that a referral from another dental professional is not required and that they would welcome patient referrals. For every patient treated, there is the

potential of many more referrals from their core of family, friends, and acquaintances. The power of referrals is illustrated through the following example. A single patient recommends three patients, who each refer three other patients, who in turn each refer three additional patients. In just two generations of referrals, that first patient has indirectly generated 39 new patients for the practice. Patients generally refer other patients with similar needs. These referrals are especially effective since the noticeable esthetic improvement is a testimonial to the treating prosthodontist's capabilities.

#### **Collaborative partnering**

Collaborative partnering is the process of repeated cross referrals between the prosthodontist and both general dentists and other specialists. To stimulate these referrals, an effective protocol is to "earn, ask, recognize, and reciprocate."<sup>21</sup> Referrals are earned by prosthodontists performing exceptional dentistry on the patients of the referring dentists. Prosthodontists must have the confidence to ask these dentists for repeated referrals and then recognize the contributions of others through a letter, an e-mail, or a telephone call. Most importantly, prosthodontists must reciprocate by referring back to those general dentists and specialists. Referrals to respected colleagues will only increase the rate of referrals back to prosthodontists.

Esthetic dentistry has made collaboration between prosthodontists and other medical specialists more advantageous than ever before. Prosthodontists have traditionally established relationships with surgeons and oncologists to restore impaired function and esthetics altered from trauma, congenital, and carcinogenic defects. With the current emphasis on appearance enhancement, it is beneficial to coordinate efforts with dermatologists and reconstructive surgeons who also perform elective esthetic procedures.

#### **Image congruency**

A patient's perception of the prosthodontist's esthetic services is influenced largely by their perception of the prosthodontist, the employees, and the office environment. A prosthodontist's own smile and the employees' smiles should meet the standards conveyed to patients. The dental office itself should radiate a feeling of esthetics. The design and color selection of the office décor should be one of taste and style that communicates an appreciation of esthetics. Business and appoint-

ment cards as well as office stationery could include the ACP's tag line and express an esthetic message. Patients should be advised of the esthetic customization that the prosthodontist's in-house laboratory provides and may be introduced to the ceramic artists who will be involved in their esthetic treatment. A high-tech office also sends the message of image congruency indicating that the prosthodontist has invested in the technology required to optimize esthetic results.

#### **Before and after images**

Patients often become motivated to personally consider esthetic dental procedures after seeing the dramatic transformation of other patients from an unattractive smile to a radiant facial enhancement. Before and after photographs or digital images of the prosthodontist's treated patients can be displayed in the reception area or on operatory monitors. Use of their full facial pictures provides the most dramatic impact on prospective esthetic candidates; however, treated patients must expressly authorize the use of their pictures for promotional purposes. Computer-generated imaging allows patients to view their own potential esthetic metamorphosis. These images are much more convincing than proprietary pictures.

#### **Patient education**

An office visit provides an opportunity to educate patients about prosthodontics and esthetic services. The educational experience can be supported with brochures, photo albums, chair-side evaluation using intraoral cameras, multimedia patient education systems, and computer-generated esthetic imaging. These learning aids can be designed for an individual practice, or can be purchased from the ACP or many commercial sources.

Patients generally have a preconceived notion of a dental procedure that will correct their esthetic problem. They may not be aware of other alternatives that are available. Prosthodontists are obligated to inform their patients of the treatment option with the highest esthetic potential. Often, the selection of this option will lead to results beyond what the patient thought was possible. For example, a patient might ask for "bondings" to correct a few discolored areas. Upon examination, the prosthodontist realizes that the clinical crowns are short, the incisal edges are worn, and the patient displays excess gingiva. In this case, it would be appropriate for the prosthodontist to inform and educate the patient about the advantages of

ceramic veneers as well as crown lengthening to maximize the esthetic outcome. This approach allows the patient to make the most informed decision regarding smile improvement.

#### **Letters of recognition**

It is customary and courteous for a prosthodontist to send a note to the patient, referring dentist, or medical specialist expressing appreciation for the referral. However, a posttreatment letter that acknowledges the treatment team's success is a more powerful promotional tool. All team members should receive a copy of the letter with before and after images (facial images only used with the patient's expressed authorization). This posttreatment correspondence will have significant impact on those team members who may not have the opportunity to examine the definitive esthetic results.

#### **Credibility builders**

Credibility builders provide a means of highlighting professional accomplishments to convince patients and other dental professionals to select a particular prosthodontist. Presentations at dental meetings, given by or sponsored by the prosthodontist, showcase successful esthetic procedures to general dentists and specialists. Esthetic articles authored by the prosthodontist in peer-reviewed journals also build credibility with dental practitioners.

Published articles, lecture brochures, and curriculum vitae compiled in leather-bound notebooks located in the reception area are subtle, yet effective, credibility builders. Testimonial letters from satisfied patients also provide a convincing case that the prosthodontist is the dentist who will fulfill a patient's esthetic expectations. These letters of praise will stimulate other satisfied patients to write their own testimonials. Patients should be informed that the prosthodontist is either board eligible or board certified and what the certification process represents. When questioned by well-informed patients, prosthodontists and their employees must be prepared to quantify the experience of the prosthodontist in years and in numbers of particular esthetic techniques performed.

### **Advertising**

Advertising is the second type of marketing and is defined as a paid form of communication directed to a target market by an identifiable sponsor. Examples of advertising media are broadcast (tele-

vision and radio), print (newspapers, magazines, specialty and trade publications), direct mail, and electronic (e-mails, personal websites, and website advertisements). Advertising carries a fairly high economic risk with no payback guarantees. It is imperative that the prosthodontist closely monitor the results of individual advertising campaigns to ensure that the number of new patients generated warrants the cost outlay. Advertising may be more appropriate for larger group practices, which would reduce the individual clinician's share of the costs. The ACP has explored the use of advertising for promoting the specialty to the public and has determined that, presently, the cost is prohibitive on a national scale.

The selection of the most appropriate marketing techniques must be consistent with the prosthodontist's individual personality and marketing style. Some prosthodontists may prefer a very aggressive, high-visibility advertising campaign. Other prosthodontists may be uncomfortable with the use of advertising, perceiving that it conveys an image of commercialism over professionalism, and opt for a more understated marketing approach.

The aforementioned marketing techniques can be introduced simultaneously or sequentially. This decision is largely based on the prosthodontist's goals, size of the marketing budget, and the availability of resources for deployment. Most prosthodontists will rely on a sequential approach due to the inevitable distraction from their core focus of patient treatment. Prior to execution of the marketing plan, the prosthodontist or marketing coordinator must educate employees, define the employees' role in execution, and gain their support. It is critical that employees systematically track the specific source of new patients. The practice performance against the marketing goals should be reviewed quarterly and year-to-date versus similar periods in the previous year. At least annually, the marketing plan should be revisited and specific adjustments made to improve its overall effectiveness. Those marketing techniques with a low return on investment should be reevaluated or eliminated.

### **Conclusions**

In prosthodontics, a successful esthetic practice contains two vital components. First, technical excellence is a must. Second, promotional

proficiency is the new reality. Without significant effort to promote prosthodontists, the role of the specialty and individual prosthodontists in elective esthetic procedures will diminish. Elective esthetics is not just the current wave of dentistry. It may be the enduring need that ensures the future of the specialty. In conclusion:

1. The demand for elective esthetic services is large and growing.
2. Prosthodontists are the most qualified providers of these services.
3. Prosthodontists must actively seek referrals and promote elective esthetic dental procedures.

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