



Unconscious Response

By Anne Levitch

Let's start with the bottom line. There are many influences on the perception a patient has to a dental practice; the majority being unconscious. Let's be rational and define 'the unconscious'... the part of the mind which is inaccessible to the conscious mind but which affects behaviour and emotions.

We rely on our sensory perception and unconscious in every waking moment, to sift information, and make decisions. We can feel strongly and act decisively on unconscious cues, and give ourselves very rational reasons for doing so.

What does this mean to you as a practitioner? Primarily, be aware that your patient does not judge the practice and service received on the obvious level of the quality of their dental treatment. In fact, sadly, the majority of patients have absolutely no idea about the quality of work you have studied for years, continuously improved your skills and laboured to provide them.

Your patient really has no ability to make a clear value judgement on the quality of the dental treatment. Apart from a look in a mirror before they leave the surgery, and the sensation of comfort throughout the process, they have no way of knowing if you have done a great job.

They rely on unconscious sensory cues ... how they felt in the waiting area, verbal communication with

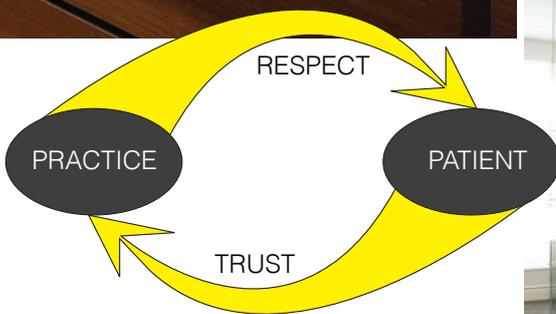
staff and practitioner, what they heard, saw, smelt and noticed while they were in the practice environment, and how they felt when they paid the bill and left. The dental treatment provided is only a part of what influences their perception of the service overall.

Perhaps an example may assist here. You go to a restaurant for dinner with friends. It has had good reviews for the food. You walk in the door and instantly get a feeling for the 'vibe' of the place. You anticipate the experience ahead in milliseconds, as you are taken to the table by the waiter. What you see, hear, and smell in this initial timeframe, will strongly influence your positive or negative unconscious response.

All the sensory cues influence your response.

A dental practice is no difference at all. There is no distinction on the 'unconscious' level between the service environment and the service. That word "unconscious" is hard to deal with sometimes. It defies logic and has so much influence on our responses that it is a powerful but invisible, intangible driver on our behaviour whether we like it or not. I am sure you can relate to other experiences in your own life.

Back in the 1930's a man called Louis Cheskin migrated to USA from the Ukraine in his 20's and looked at American culture with the perceptive eyes of an outsider. He was fascinated having come from a



communist country, to see how a consumer culture was able to influence behaviour and perception.

In western culture, we have grown being surrounded by consumer literature and marketing to the point where we 'consciously' do not see it. It is part of the physical and cultural air we breathe to the point where we will generally deny we are influenced at all.

Isn't it hard enough to be the best practitioner you can, without having to worry about patient perceptions?

Well yes, but you have already done the hard part, in studying and getting that plaque on your wall. If you consider the rest as the necessary support factors in achieving success then you may be intrigued rather than stressed by the concept.

Consider the service environment as just another tool to assist.

Cheskin built his methods on observation, rather than answers to questions. His methods focused on understanding what consumers felt desired, and needed, rather than asking them what they thought they wanted.

A patient is a consumer of a health-care service. Cheskin coined the concept of SENSATION TRANSFERENCE. He believed that patients (consumers) do not

make a distinction on the unconscious level between the environment (package) and the service (product). The service IS perceived as the service and environment combined. A service environment creates a patient perception which is transferred directly to concepts of value, price, quality, and emotion. These, in turn, create and fulfil expectations of satisfaction. Cheskin's research confirmed the important role in both customer choice and satisfaction.

Influencing patients' perception is not as difficult as it may sound.

Patients need to feel valued, appreciated, heard and understood. This equates to feeling respect from the practice. In return, a patient will then place their trust in the practice to provide their optimal dental health.

There is immense value in the symbiotic relationship between practice and patient. When a practice respects a patient on all levels of interaction, the patient will trust the practice on all levels of interaction: simple, incredibly effective and to the advantage of both parties.

It is a designer's job to create an environment to support and affect positive response and behaviour. The optimal response is identified, and then a design prepared to create it.

The value of investing in the 'unconscious' influence of the environment on practice success should be valued, and never be underrated. ♦