



Sensation transference - Part 2

How patients can be confused by your environment.

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OR



In this column, we follow on with Part Two of Sensation Transference and why it affects the experience of a dental patient. Imagery and sensory experiences trigger meaning. Cheskin was fond of stating ‘perception is reality’, and wasn’t interested in what customers thought about the package, but rather how the package made them feel about the product. Throughout this column, I will substitute the word ‘service’ for ‘product’ and ‘service environment’ for ‘package’. So now, let’s translate that into the terms of our industry... we should focus on how the service environment influences a patient’s feelings about the service, rather than what the patient thought about the service environment. The emphasis here is on ‘feeling’ rather than ‘thinking’.

To put it another way, Cheskin believed that - on an un-conscious level - most of us don’t make a distinction between the service and the service environment. The ‘service’ is the service environment and the service combined. This is correct.

Cheskin viewed these concepts as natural extensions of his understanding of patient experience. In his view, there were no meaningful distinctions between advertising, price, service environment, service or brand. He approached these as an integrated whole.

His innovative insight was that impressions created in patients’ minds, based on experiencing ‘services’ sensorially, transferred directly to concepts of value, price, quality and emotion. These, in turn, created and fulfilled expectations of satisfaction. Cheskin’s research again didn’t always explain why these associations existed, but he confirmed that they did play an important role in both customer choice and satisfaction.

In confirming this, one famous Cheskin study involved the testing of identical deodorants in different packages. Samples were mailed to users and told that they were different. However, the only difference between them was their packaging (three different colour schemes). As one might expect from Cheskin’s work, the trials showed that customers preferred one over the

others. In fact, some perceived one of the samples as so threatening that they reported rashes and trips to dermatologists, yet had no trouble with the same formula in a different package.

It could be concluded that consumers are not aware of their reactions, that they are irrational. However, this is incredibly invaluable in understanding how people behave. That people have strong reactions to elements separate from service effectiveness is not a novel concept. In fact, it is important to take this into account when servicing patients’ needs.

Though Cheskin’s process was created and perfected in the 1950s and 1960s, it is just as relevant today. Indeed, research continues to confirm his sensation transference phenomenon.

Let’s apply his theory to healthcare. In formulaic terms:

Service Environment + Service = Perception of Service

Perception creates the patient’s reality. Now that you are aware of Cheskin’s proven approach, you will understand how strongly your patients are influenced by the environment you work in.

Coming full circle, this brings me back to the concept of CONGRUENCY which breeds TRUST. A patient makes a judgement about the value and quality of their treatment based on their perception of the service and how they feel in your practice. As they are generally unable to assess the quality of your clinical expertise, a patient will utilise his or her un-conscious and conscious perception of the service experience. So, the perception becomes the reality.

About the author

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