



PART ONE
IN A SERIES

Why we hate advertising

Strategies for boosting your image, your business and your profits

By Dr Genna Levitch

Marketing is a dirty word to most professionals. And for good reason, as we contend that we have done without it for centuries! In some ways, we are defined by our distaste for self-promotion. Oral-B's famous 'Rob the Dentist' in the TV ad is a manifestation of the classic faceless dentist. In the ad, he balances on the fine line of promoting Preventative Oral Health without sliding into any of that nasty self-aggrandisement. The ad confuses the public, but gets a reluctant nod from the profession. Reluctant? Well, we all know that no company should be selling a lowly product using the credibility of the dental profession as a marketing tool. Our credibility is too valuable to be trifled with, especially in the flogging of toothbrushes.

Is the faceless dentist or 65 pages of ads in the *Yellow Pages* what marketing is all about? Definitely not. But to understand why the ads are generally so poorly done and why they engender such powerful responses in us, one has to go back all the way to the middle ages.

As usual, it's all the lawyers fault—they started it. After the Black Death of the 15th Century, the population of Europe was reduced by as much as a third. The serfs were particularly inconsiderate by dying in such large numbers that the estates of the landed gentry and then the gentry themselves could no longer be maintained in the manner they had become accustomed. The younger sons especially were hit hard by the loss of a viable inheritance. To live a life of leisure without actively working was no longer possible. To maintain their social status, these 'professional men' entered law, the clergy or the army. These were the first professions and provided the aristocracy a socially acceptable way of making a living.

Members of the professions were given high individual status and lived the life of gentlemen, which was synonymous with being a professional. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the growth of capitalism and the industrial revolution brought about the need

for newer occupational professions including medicine and accounting.

The traditional professions realised that they had a privileged position and sought to differentiate themselves from other workers by formalising the attributes that set them apart. This included "a dislike of competition, advertising and profit, a belief in the principle of payments in order to work, rather than working for pay and the belief in the superiority of the service motive".

They created artificial monopolies in the name of protecting the public from unscrupulous operators and developed exclusionary practices to protect themselves from market competition. They organised rigorous barriers to entry, their own training and credentialing and policed their own occupations. This added support to their claim that they were so highly trustworthy they even could be entrusted with their self-regulation. After all, the definition of a gentleman is a man who has internalised a code of conduct; one who uses a bread knife whilst dining alone. Concurrently, they developed codes of ethics, which strictly controlled

their members and further elevated their position in society.

The professional market operated under a credo, the first part of which is commonly quoted, the second part applies to the professions: *caveat emptor, credot emptor* which means: "let the buyer beware, let the consumer trust". By developing a position of high credibility in complex and fraught areas such as medicine and dentistry, the professions had said to the consumer: "in this

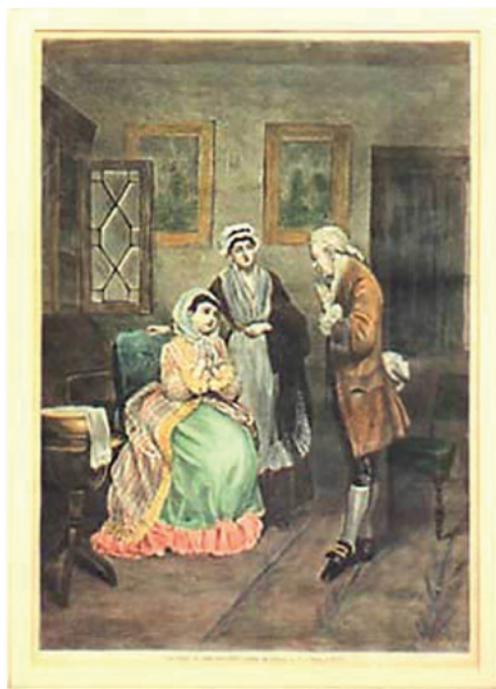


Figure 1. A true professional: A gentleman/scholar engaged in a pre-operative consultation (Courtesy of the The Haase Dental Lithographs Collection, The Pierre Fauchard Museum of Dental History).

market there is no risk; trust us". The professions, by indirect genius, achieved the pinnacle aim of marketing: marketing so powerful that selling is superfluous!

Saying no to advertising is in itself a powerful form of marketing. What the professions had intuitively grasped many centuries ago was that advertising is not the best medium for promoting a service. It is crucial for selling a product but can make a service very common. They flourished very well without advertising.

No wonder as a profession, then, that we instinctively react to any public crassness, blatancy, competition or discounting. Any outside interference, be it legislative or market driven, is fought without pause or quarter given, as any compromise to our autonomy will certainly reduce our credibility. Our credibility exists because careful men have developed and protected it for over five centuries. Without it, we would be glorified tradesmen, scrabbling for a living. Even worse, we could lose our social status!

The deep and abiding problem is that after five centuries, the world is suddenly changing. And it is seeing professionalism with its pants down. The benefit of professionalism is easy to tout; the downside is rarely mentioned: the professions have developed a privileged place in society within a self-regulated market with no requirement for competitive practices. It has become, as one marketer described, "survival of the existing with no need to be fittest".

What has changed is that the consumer is now smarter. Marketing has made him smarter. We are no longer speaking his language. What was seen to be exclusive and desirable now seems like snobbishness. There is a sneaking suspicion that the trust invested in us may have been abused. The old proclamations are no longer sufficient. It's not just directed to the dental profession. The clergy's credibility is being stripped by allegations of abuse; the army is seen as incompetent and brutal; lawyers are seen as destroyers of the truth, not upholders of justice. Yes, I agree, it's depressing; I won't go on, as I'm sure you have got the drift.

What we don't know is that marketers have spent the last 20 years trying to understand the difference between marketing a service and marketing a product. The results would astound and confuse the average dentist. Not because it is rocket science, but simply because there is a whole body of knowledge now assembled which defines why people come to see us and we do not even understand the terms used.

We have never needed to bother. Our professional position with our historical and social constructs to protect us, has made the study superfluous. The lack of competition meant that the most ordinary of dentists could set up and do OK. Some still can, but it is no longer a given that all will live comfortably; some do not succeed. The profession's construct is no longer protecting us from normal business pressures.

Some dentists, by dint of personality, application, location or all of the above, have realized that they speak the language of credibility that resonates with the modern consumer. Suddenly they have found themselves grossing fees double, triple or even quadruple the average. Most times they have not bothered to analyse the roots of their success, as they did not set out with a plan to win. They simply wanted to do the best they could.

Competition, as exists in our capitalist society, does not operate in and cannot drive change in the profession. Mavericks within the profession drive the rest to excel and grow. New products, new materials and new equipment have all been brought to us by suppliers competing for our business. We are not part of that process.



Figure 2. Early Marketing Techniques: Not only is the operator attired with the correct headwear, but also the treatment plan enforcer is strategically leaning against the cabinetry. (Courtesy of the The Haase Dental Lithographs Collection, The Pierre Fauchard Museum of Dental History).

Equipment and materials go toward a small part of our credibility but we are in the business of providing a service not selling a product. The dentists who do it differently within the established parameters of professionalism are the ones to watch.

The purpose of this series is to present ideas that fly in the face of the accepted mythology. An iconoclastic approach to the Shibboleths, as they are called. The aim is not to destroy the professional stance, as it is all we have. The hope is to refine our concepts so we better understand what it is that makes professionalism work for us and perhaps this knowledge can protect us as we redefine our position in society.

In the next article we will look at the seven classic variables in marketing and how to use them with predictable results.

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About the author

Dr Genna Levitch was in private practice for over 25 years. He has presented to Study Groups and is a University Tutor. He is a consultant in Designing, Marketing and Promoting dental practices.