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THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Help Yourself

I recently called a colleague in a distant city, and the conversation went something like this: "Welcome to Dr. X's office. If you need to make an appointment or check on an appointment, press 1 now. If you wish to check on your financial account, press 2 now. If you would like any additional services, stay on the line, and our receptionist will answer your call as soon as possible."

This kind of telephone response has become almost universal when calling large corporations, banks, airlines, insurance companies, and the like. In fact, I am so startled if I do get an actual human on the phone that I begin to sound like Porky Pig in speech therapy. But this was my first experience with hearing such a voice-mail menu from a professional office. I have always liked to think of orthodontic practices as the last bastions of simple human courtesy. Perhaps even that is changing in today's "information" society.

Most of the service we encounter these days is that which we provide ourselves. The "service" part of "service stations" disappeared a long time ago. As for groceries and household goods, I dread entering one of today's megastores to search for an item. These warehouses are almost always devoid of personnel except for cashiers, and if you happen to stumble across an employee in the aisle, the odds of that person being able to tell you where a product can be found are astronomically slim.

Rather than emphasizing the services they offer, American companies now seem to be trying to discover how little service they can provide and still stay in business. They have computerized, state-of-the-art inventory systems and sophisticated barcode readers, but few people who can actually help you find something or substitute another item that will work as well. How much business do these companies lose by not having enough personnel who can thoroughly serve their customers?

Since 1994, the University of Michigan Customer Satisfaction Index has dropped in almost every sector of the economy, and I think much of the blame can be laid

at the threshold of high tech. Technology brings efficiency and consistency. Humans, on the other hand, have to be found, trained, retrained, retained, motivated, energized, talked to, and listened to. Any orthodontist who has ever had more than one employee can tell you that employees can be a major headache. But who or what can solve more of our problems or contribute more to our financial and emotional well being than well-trained, competent personnel? The JCO Orthodontic Practice Studies report every two years that orthodontists who maximize their use of staff earn more and serve more patients than other practices. No computer can ever be programmed to respond to the myriad questions or needs of an endlessly varied public, but well-trained employees can respond as creatively as necessary and offer specific solutions for specific problems. Their responses can be as varied as the questions.

Don't get me wrong: I love high-tech materials and techniques and what they do for my staff, my patients, and me. I would not eagerly exchange my Palm Pilot for the pads of paper I used to carry. Nor would I like to revert to my old Smith Corona from my current PC. I much prefer patient data bases to the handwritten narratives I previously used. Digital images are so

much more versatile than 35mm photographs, and who among us would prefer banding to bonding?

Every orthodontic practice should take advantage of the latest advances in telecommunications—telephone systems that enable staff and patients to communicate efficiently and effectively; websites that are easy to navigate and informative; audiovisual systems that help patients understand their treatment and appliances. But we make a serious mistake if we believe that these modern technologies can ever substitute for real human contact and service.

With all the frustration experienced today by people who find themselves having to converse with machines rather than with other people, orthodontists have a better opportunity than ever to differentiate themselves from other service providers. There's no time like the present to redouble your planning and training efforts in areas where your practice shows its caring, personal side—answering telephone calls, scheduling, consultations, progress reports, follow-up calls, patient education, and patient-staff interaction in both the reception room and the operator. Try surprising people with a real human being.

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