

MANAGEMENT & MARKETING

(Editor's Note: This quarterly JCO column is compiled by Contributing Editor Howard Iba. Every three months, Dr. Iba presents a successful approach or strategy for a particular aspect of practice management. Your suggestions for future topics or authors are welcome.)

Several well-managed orthodontic offices have recently incorporated the ideas of Dr. Robert Cialdini, whose work deals with eliciting behavioral change through persuasion. In this month's article, Dr. Joe Mayes outlines six of Dr. Cialdini's techniques that can be applied in orthodontic practice to improve case acceptance and patient cooperation.

These behavioral tools can be valuable in communicating with patients and parents, or even in understanding how outside marketers deal with us. They do carry an important caveat, however, as stated in Dr. Mayes's conclusion: We need to be honest about our motives and non-manipulative in our use of persuasion. Otherwise, our patients and parents may start to feel they are being coerced, which can lead to anger and resentment.

I'd like to thank Drs. Cialdini and Mayes for bringing these ideas to our attention, and I trust we will use them wisely.

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Dr. Iba



Dr. Mayes

The Psychology of Influence in Orthodontics

This article is based on the work of Dr. Robert B. Cialdini, Regents Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University.^{1,2} Dr. Cialdini has studied how one person can influence another person's attitudes and actions, concentrating on the methods that bring about a particular form of behavior change—compliance with a request. There are six basic tools of persuasion, which can be applied to orthodontic practices as outlined below.

1. Reciprocation

The principle of reciprocity is a societal norm under which most individuals tend to repay in kind what they have received—whether it is a gift, a favor, or a concession. No one wants to be considered a moocher or an ingrate. Reciprocity, after all, is based on simple common courtesy. When using this tool in orthodontics, there are numerous things to do and say:

Things to Do

- Give out T-shirts at the new patient exam, not the start of treatment.
- After a patient expresses thanks, use the opportunity to ask for referrals.
- Send thank-you notes to doctors and patients for referrals.
- Provide staff lunches within referring doctors' offices.
- Refer patients to doctors who refer to you.
- Be charitable.

Things to Say

- “We’re here to help you achieve your commitment to the best orthodontic result possible.”
- “Our office offers complimentary x-rays and digital photographs needed to diagnose your individual case. This initial visit is a service from our office to you.”
- “We promise to treat your case at the one most appropriate time for the best result in the least amount of active treatment time.”

2. Consistency

This attribute is highly valued in nearly every culture. When using consistency, the two things to remember are that the commitment has to be voluntarily made and that it needs to be vocalized or, preferably, written. Once a public commitment has been made—that is, to take a stand, to go on record—the stage has been set for automatic consistency to remain faithful to that commitment, no matter how small or large.

Things to Do

- Start with small commitments and build (ask new patients why they came to you).
- Use the implied “if you liked our work before (with an older sibling), you should like it again”.
- Script new patient phone calls, appointments, appliances, etc., to establish mutual commitments.
- Notify parents of a problem and be sure to follow up one week later.

Things to Say

- “Am I right that you would like _____ to have the best orthodontic care possible?” (Wait for an affirmative reply.)
- “Will you please call if you need to change the appointment?” (Wait for an affirmative reply.)
- “Congratulations on your commitment to your child’s orthodontic needs, and please know that you also have ours.”

3. Social Validation

People tend to assume that an action is correct if other people are doing it.³ This means that a request can elicit compliance by demonstrating—or merely implying—that others have already complied. Social validation allows us to cruise confidently through many decisions without having to investigate pros and cons. In using this tool of persuasion, remember that people are especially likely to follow the actions of others when they are in unfamiliar situations or when they are uncertain about the right thing to do.

Things to Do

- Keep a book in the reception area with smiling photos and testimonial letters from happy patients.
- Use examples of similar cases you have treated successfully.
- *Always* have other patients in the office when seeing new patients.
- Display a sign in the reception area: “80% of our patients are referred by other patients. We thank you for that.”

Things to Say

- “More and more adults are getting braces.”
- “. . . fastest-growing practice . . .”
- “. . . best-known practice . . .”
- “Others just like you found . . .”
- “Our practice grows because other people like our results and tell their friends.”

4. Liking

As a rule, we say “yes” to requests from people we like. This “liking” response can be stimulated by physical attractiveness or cooperation on the part of the requester, but in general, we like people who are like ourselves. It is a validation of who we are, our beliefs, and our core values, and it helps build our self-esteem.

Things to Do

- Find real similarities between you and your patients and parents, and train your staff to do the same.
- Offer sincere compliments.
- Look for opportunities for cooperation.
- Offer above-average patient care that is delivered on time.
- Warmly welcome patients to the office on each visit.
- Find a way to grow to like every patient—even the difficult ones—and show it.

Things to Say

- “We are lucky to have kind friends like you saying nice things about us.”
- “I’m looking forward to getting to know you better.”
- “It really makes my day to meet a super boy/girl like you.”
- “You seem like a neat young man/woman, and I look forward to us becoming friends.”

5. Authority

Symbols of authority as simple as a coat and tie can stimulate compliance. Claims of experience, expertise, and scientific credentials are other ways to establish authority. The opinions of true authority figures help us make fast and accurate decisions. When using authority, it is important to “show that you know”. The key to being a genuine, credible authority on orthodontics is to provide meaningful information that is up-to-date, accurate, and helpful.

Things to Do

- Be professional in actions, language, and dress.
- Let people see your awards and credentials.
- Place a book in the reception area with letters from other orthodontists.
- Acquire and display a knowledge of all aspects of orthodontics.

Things to Say

- “. . . a recognized leader in the field of orthodontics . . .”
- “Braces are still a little uncomfortable, but . . .”
- “Dr. _____ teaches at . . .”
- “Dr. _____ lectures to other orthodontists.”
- “Dr. _____ frequently answers questions from other orthodontists.”

6. Scarcity

The effect of scarcity on the value of commodities has been well established, but even information tends to be perceived as more valuable when it is exclusive or in limited supply. Possessing scarce items signifies something about the intelligence and status of the person who has them.

Things to Do

- Emphasize the unique features of your office.
- Emphasize scarcity when it is genuine.
- Emphasize exclusivity of information.
- Emphasize appliances that you solely use.
- Offer only one morning and one afternoon time when making appointments.

Things to Say

- “There is only one ideal treatment time.”
- “These kinds of appointments go fast at this time of year.”
- “Appointments like this fill very quickly, so let’s get yours scheduled.”
- “We don’t want to lose our ideal treatment time.”
- “Our office is rare in that we have years of experience with the types of appliances needed to treat your case.”

Conclusion: Knowledge Is Power

As marketers and advertising agencies recognize, knowing these rules of influence can be empowering. By understanding and employing

the major tools of persuasion, we can greatly increase compliance with our requests. In so doing, however, we must be careful never to use these principles in deceptive or manipulative ways. If we persuade by pointing to the presence of genuine expertise, of truly growing social validation, of pertinent commitments, of real opportunities for cooperation, and so on, we serve the interests of all parties—our patients, their parents, and ourselves.

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