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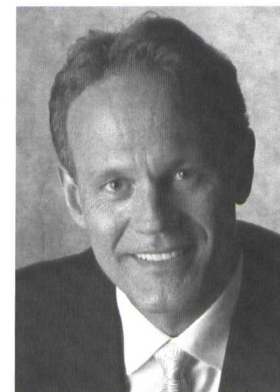
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Continuing Education We Can Believe In

The anniversary of my 30th year in practice is fast approaching. Though dental school graduation seems like it happened some time ago, the act of practicing has had some of the same objectives throughout my career. One of those objectives includes preparing my staff and myself to provide the best dentistry we can. For me, continuing education (CE) is the primary cornerstone from which to satisfy that goal.

In 29 years of practice, and attendance at 150-200 hours of postgraduate education per year for the past 15 years, I feel that I have learned some valuable lessons about choosing what is important for my continuing education dollar. Lessons that, when taken into account, can help plan postgraduate education effectively.

Continuing education is a necessity! I have seen an ad from a state dental association that said, "Come to the state meeting and get all of the CE necessary for your licensing requirements in one weekend." Now, we should all support our state associations and their meetings. However, to think that we are so educated upon graduation that all we need is a weekend of education every year to be our best is pure folly.

Make no mistake about it; finding the right CE takes effort and research. We must objectively evaluate our own personal inadequacies after graduation and then strategically select education that adds to our skill set. Timing is everything. Determine not only what you need to know immediately, but also what would be beneficial for your practice in the future. Construct a timetable for you to work those CE objectives into your business plan.

Continuing education is expensive; make the most of it. Not only do the direct fees (tuition, travel, and hotel) associated with contemporary CE give us pause, but when you introduce the indirect costs of closing the office or losing significant production during the days one is gone, the decision becomes increasingly serious. The time and efforts put into selecting appropriate CE should be akin to making investment decisions with one's life savings. In evaluating choices, the last consideration a practitioner should use in selecting an appropriate CE course is the attractive appearance of the marketing brochure that may come across their desk.

There are certainly different levels of educational opportunities. Sometimes we can find an excellent offering right in our hometown. Supporting local entities that offer CE opportunities is critically important.

There are also times when we decide to travel for something we feel would satisfy a significant need in our knowledge and/or skill set. The courses are usually multiple-day offerings that cost significantly more. For those decisions, it is important that there be appropriate analysis of those offerings. Learn to assess slick marketing endeavors for what they are, and when possible, obtain solid data from people who have attended courses in which you are interested.

At times the courses we wish to take are part of a series or curriculum. In addition to the time spent in class, there are subtleties that can prove to be a major difference when determining in which program to enroll. For instance, what is the level of support that the educational entity has in place for the attendee before, during, and after a CE course? Are there support systems to answer questions concerning the presented material or questions involving implementation issues after an attendee

returns to the office? Or is the nature of the follow-up material you receive solely focused on getting you to sign up for the next course in the curriculum? There are educational centers that have significant mentoring structures in place as a part of the way they take care of their attendees. That support is very significant and it can be exceedingly helpful.

Budget to educate your staff as well as yourself. If you don't feel your staff is worth this expense, you don't have the right staff in place. When you do have the right staff in place, this decision pays dividends. You need to vet their courses and/or programs just like you would your own. Invest in your staff so they can transform their jobs into careers and your office will forever be the beneficiary of that decision.

Though clinical foundations are important, learning how to make sound dentistry work in a challenging business environment is a close second. There needs to be a balance between clinical and non-clinical educational pursuits. If the material content involves the business of dentistry, it becomes increasingly important that the entire staff attend. The exposure to the material is critical for them to gain an understanding of the business in which they work and/or the communication processes to which they should adhere.

Know thy speaker. Well, you don't have to know him or her personally. However, knowing whether they care about your understanding the material is important. Trust your instincts. An atmosphere of learning is clearly recognizable to an attendee. The ego of the speaker should always yield to the needs of the student or attendee. True educators are more concerned

that their message or course content is beneficial to the attendee. They will work hard to see that the message gets through. Their motivation is apparent.

Disclosures by a speaker or CE entity are important. We all should be grateful for the sponsorship support that organizations receive to help them bring CE to us. Without the support of our corporate partners, we would have a fraction of the opportunities that currently exist. However, as an attendee, I would hope that it is agreeable for me to know the type of support that is being given (ie, honorarium support) whether the speaker is on the company payroll, and/or whether a speaker has a vested interest in the product.

Hands-on workshops are inextricably linked to the products involved. We owe those companies a debt of gratitude for all of the hard work and logistical handling that goes into providing us with that experience. However, in lectures, infomercials cloaked as education should not be tolerated. Selling from the podium without disclosure should be eliminated. And, when it is done, there should be repercussions.

Conclusion

I am aware that there are generational differences in how we obtain our CE. Regardless of the CE modality a person prefers, consideration of these tenets when choosing which educational options to invest in can have a positive effect. When applied, you will find that the resulting investment of time and money for CE has been well spent.

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