

FOCUS ON: Treating People Not Patients



Q: What inspired you to write *Treating People, Not Patients*?

A: My motivation for writing this book stemmed from my personal journey as both a patient and a professional. A traumatic bike accident at 8 left me with 2 broken front teeth that remained unrepaired until I turned 18. This experience as a patient deepened my empathy and led me to develop a keen interest in anterior reconstruction with dental implants and bone grafting. My love of hospitality was shaped by my work in the restaurant industry—from a busser to waiter and as a cook. This background changed my perspective on patient care. I focus more on the patient's experience as a person than solely on the procedure I am performing.

Q: How do you see parallels between a restaurant and a dental practice?

A: When I opened my dental practice in 1985, a restaurant also opened next door. I was struck by their emphasis on ambiance, quality of food, and service. As a food enthusiast and someone who has worked in restaurants, I have always been attentive to details—be it the decor, the food, or the service standards. For many years, restaurants were evaluated by the Zagat Survey, which rated them based on 3 key criteria: food quality, decor, and service.

Similarly, dental practices, in my view, operate on analogous principles. While we provide dentistry instead of food, I assume that the dental care offered at most practices is comparable. Many patients do not differentiate practices by the quality of dental work since they lack the expertise to judge. Instead, they base their preferences on their overall experience—how they are treated and the ambiance of the clinic. The decor in a dental office plays a crucial role; patients note the cleanliness, the appearance of the staff, and even small touches like the quality of soaps in the restroom and the complimentary toothpaste and toothbrushes. Just as diners remember excellent service at a restaurant, dental patients recall their interactions with the staff and the overall experience more than the specifics of their dental procedures.

Both restaurants and dental offices thrive on the foundation of excellent service and a pleasant environment, whether the primary offering is food or dental care.

Q: How do you provide both excellent service to your patients and perform excellent clinical care?

A: While dental schools equip students with clinical skills—from extractions to crowns—they often overlook the human aspect of patient care. These institutions set requirements for procedural achievements, but they don't emphasize the importance of patient experience. Drawing from my unique background as a patient and my experiences in the restaurant industry, I realized the significance of patient care beyond clinical procedures.

Patients who feel cared for are more relaxed, satisfied, and likely to refer others. But achieving this level of care is a collective effort. Before a patient meets me, he or she interacts with various elements of my practice, from our website to the physical ambiance of the clinic. By the time the patient sits in the dental chair, he or she has encountered multiple touchpoints, from receptionists on the phone and in person to dental assistants. The patient's perception, shaped by these interactions, often dictates his or her willingness to undergo treatment.

The success of a dental practice hinges on its team. It is crucial to invest in team training and maintain open channels of communication. Regular meetings, be they daily, weekly, or monthly, ensure everyone is aligned with the practice's goals and vision. Running an efficient, patient-centric practice isn't just beneficial for the patient—it is also more fulfilling for the dental team.

To achieve this balance between excellent clinical work and unmatched patient experience, it is imperative to operate as a cohesive unit, emphasizing both the clinical and personal touchpoints that shape a patient's journey.

Q: How do you create an excellent team?

A: Building an exemplary team starts well before an individual comes to work. Our hiring process is rigorous and multi-phased:

1. Advertisement and resume review—We initiate with a carefully crafted job posting and meticulously screen applicants based on their resumes.
2. Culture index—Potential candidates undergo a "culture index" to ensure alignment with our office's values and ethos.
3. Initial interviews—We conduct online FaceTime interviews, followed by a brief, in-person "blink" interview where I personally meet the candidate for a couple of minutes.
4. Working interview—If they pass the earlier stages, candidates then participate in a half- or full-day working interview in our practice.
5. Team involvement—Crucially, the decision to hire is not solely mine. Teammates hire teammates. For a candidate to join, they need to integrate seamlessly with the existing team, ensuring a harmonious working environment.

For a deeper dive into our practices and to assess your own, I recommend my book, *Treating People, Not Patients*, which offers detailed insights and questionnaires. Also, my online video series serves as an excellent training tool, complemented by a workbook for in-depth exploration. All these resources and more can be found at michaelsonick.com.

ABOUT MICHAEL SONICK, DMD

Dr. Sonick is a highly regarded international authority in periodontology, dental implants, and the delivery of exceptional customer service. He is a Diplomate of the American Academy of Periodontology, International Congress of Oral Implantology, International Society of Periodontal Plastic Surgeons, an ITI fellow, and an Eagle Scout.

He can be reached at mike@sonickdmd.com and michaelsonick.com

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Dr. Sonick will give you the framework for growing a practice based on providing great service to patients, and will show you how an emphasis on hospitality, combined with a patient-centric experience will help you connect with and serve your patients.

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