

By Charles D. Samaras, DMD, FACD, FICD

We've all heard remarks about dental sales reps — the good, bad, ugly, and annoying. However, good dental sales reps can and should be an integral part of your dental team, just like dental labs, study clubs, accountants, and financial planners. In fact, a dental rep can play a major role in your practice success.

In my case, it was a dental rep that changed both my practice and life in a dramatic and precipitously positive way. Over 20 years ago I decided to build a new dental office and create the practice of my dreams. I had been practicing in a high volume atmosphere that became unfulfilling and tiresome. I had no time for anything except work. My goal was to practice in a quality-driven, service-oriented, moderate-volume environment. So I built a new office.

Shortly after my new office opening, a new rep from my dental supply company visited my office on a Friday afternoon. She explained that she wanted to drop in a couple of times a week to observe my practice, get to know the dental team and patients, and see how my practice operated. For five months she came in, observed, took notes, and even engaged our patients in conversation. On several occasions she came with us for lunch and our monthly Friday post work cocktails and appetizers.

At one of the Friday office get togethers she asked if she could meet with me for about an hour to discuss some suggestions she had for my practice. I agreed, and we set up a meeting for the following week. I expected her to come in and recommend a few dental products. I was not prepared for what she said to me. "Dr. Samaras, I believe I have established a very good relationship with you and your team." I responded, "Yes you have." She then said, "I've been observing your practice for over five months, and you're a really good doctor and you have a really good practice and team, however, I believe you have not come anywhere close to realizing your full practice potential, and I would like to discuss with you how to accomplish that."

I was stunned! I never expected a rep to say that to me. It took me a couple of seconds to recover my thoughts and realize that it took a lot of guts to make that statement, but it was made out of thoughtfulness, conviction, and love, and therefore she was willing to put our entire professional relationship on the line. Thankfully, my response was, "OK, what have you got?" She explained how technology would help me accomplish the practice of my dreams. I listened, acted on her recommendations, and the rest, as

they say, is history!

My point here is to describe what an excellent dental rep can and should be for a practice. I understand that a dental rep makes a living by selling products. But, products are best sold when a relationship is established with the dentist and team. This is true for reps of product manufacturers as well as dental supply company reps. With no relationship, the dentist has no time or vested interest in a rep that comes into his or her office unknown. The dentist has to perceive a practice benefit and it is up to the rep to present that benefit.

So, how do reps establish a relationship? They should start by arranging a meeting with the dentist to discuss the practice vision and goals, and how they can work together to accomplish these goals. They should only make recommendations they are confident will be consistent with and beneficial to their client's practice. Then they should establish a time when they and the dentist can spend uninterrupted time every couple of weeks to review recommendations and product purchases, get feedback on new products, and present new products, technology, and equipment with literature, clinical studies, and product reviews in journals and dental publications.

A doctor most likely will not buy a product that has no clinical studies or evidence that says it will benefit the practice. Whenever possible, a sample of a new product should be provided for the doctor or team member to use in a treatment case. Another valuable asset a rep can provide is continuing education opportunities for dentists and teams. There is no better way to learn about equipment, technology, or products than continuing education. I believe dental teams function better when they learn together. I also believe that reps should attend these educational opportunities with their office accounts.

It's all about being recognized as part of the dental practice team. Once that relationship has been established, the equipment, technology, and products will sell themselves.

Charles D. Samaras, DMD, FACD, FICD, has practiced dentistry for more than 28 years. A graduate of Tufts University School of Dental Medicine, he served as director of practice management there for nine years. Dr. Samaras is an international speaker, author, and a cofounder of 21st Century Practice Solutions. Reach him at csamaras@nc.rr.com.