



PATIENT DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN A DENTAL ENVIRONMENT

Dental Science

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ABSTRACT

An understanding of patient's decision making process helps a Dentist to present various treatment options in an appropriate and a legitimate way. The dynamics of today's practice is changing, where information search is made through various media. Patients pass through sequential steps comprising of, problem recognition, pre-purchase information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase outcome and reaction before a choice is made. This paper provides an overview of how choices are made scientifically which helps the dentist to sustain an established practice and to successfully deliver the Dental treatment.

KEYWORDS

Dental, evoked set, compensatory, non -compensatory rules, performance, expectation, clinic loyalty

An understanding of the patient decision making process, helps a Dentist to present various treatment options in an appropriate and truthful way. The same template could be used to market one's own practice accordingly. Understanding the dynamics of changing perception [1, 2] of young patients is paramount essential in delivering the Dental needs of the patient. The changing trend of today's practice is, patient checks all the information through electronic media even before making an enquiry. This compels the health care provider to be a step ahead in knowing the thought process of the patient. An individual may or may not even realize that his decision making process runs in a definitive structured pattern John Dewey's (1910) original model of Decision making was modified by Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) into five -stage problem solving process and applied here to the patient behaviour.

Five stages in decision making process [3, 4] are as follows.

- I. Problem recognition
- II. Pre-Purchase information search
- III. Evaluation of alternatives
- IV. Purchase decision
- V. Post-purchase outcome and reactions

I. Problem recognition [3,4]

A patient perceives that he has got forwardly placed teeth. This stimulus could be internally motivated, wherein he himself feels the need for the treatment or could be externally driven, someone suggesting treatment for better aesthetics. Problem recognition could result when (i) Actual state changes- The patient's present denture has broken and is in need of new one. These are reactive patients, they react only when a problem arise. (ii) Desired state changes-His present removable denture is functioning well, but wants a fixed prosthesis as suggested by his friends. These are proactive patients who are willing to experiment with newer and advanced products.

Based on Hierarchy of needs by Maslow, lower level of needs (biological and Physiological needs) must be fulfilled before higher needs (esteem, self-actualisation) are met. [5, 6] Patients presenting complaint has to be addressed first before embarking on other treatment modalities.

II. Pre -Purchase information search:

The next stage of decision making is information search, wherein need related data are assimilated. A list of pros and cons are made even-though it might be time consuming. Considering a patient wants to buy a mouth wash as a over the counter product. The choice could be depended on - (i) Product category -herbal or alcohol based (ii) Pricing

(iii) Brands and avail offers (iv) acceptability of taste.

III. Evaluation of alternatives:

This involves: i) Generation of choice alternatives [7] ii) Identification of evaluative criteria iii) Application of Decision Rules.

i) Generation of Choices: [8, 9] considering a patient want to choose a dental clinic for treatment. He makes a list available from the internet.

a) Evoked set/Consideration set: It is the list of dental clinics that patient perceives to be acceptable. [10]

b) Inept set: This is the set which he excludes from the list as he finds them to be inferior or unacceptable.

c) Inert set: It is narrowed down from evoked set. Patient on further consideration excludes [11]clinics ,as he perceives them to be less benefit. This could be based on proximity of his stay to the Dental clinic, appointment time preference based upon his work shift, insurance/claim acceptance.

d) Choice set: The final set contains one or two clinics from which he ultimately decides.[12]

ii) Identification of evaluative criteria: The choice made by the patient depends on benefits, attributes and features a product could offer. This is depended on three factors.

a) Economic: The patient wants value for money to get the best dental service. Brand image [13] of the clinic, quality evaluation certificate from external agencies, infra-structure facilities are some of the factors that could determine in choosing the clinic.

b) Behavioural: Largely depends on physical, psychological and personality of the individual.

c) Social influences: The choice is depended on family, friends and peers.Many tend to follow the advice of opinion leaders .They could be experts/leaders/person with high social status.

iii) Application of decision rules: 11, 12

These decision rules help in simplifying the decision process. These can be of two types.

a) Compensatory rules: Various evaluative criteria are listed as attributes. Based on the attributes the products are ranked. Consider the patient has many brands of tooth paste to select. The patient could select depending on attributes like flavour, cost, brand offer, brand

package. Lesser rating of one brand in one attribute could be compensated with higher attribute of same brand. This is called Compensatory rule. Higher pricing could be compensated with likeable flavour in a brand. The patient could select the brand that scores the highest among the various alternatives that have been evaluated.

b) Non Compensatory rules: Negative attribute eliminates the product from the list. It could be of three types-conjunctive, disjunctive and lexicographic.

i. Conjunctive: A cut off point is established for each attribute. A product that falls below the limit on any of the attributes is rejected. Consider the patient wants to select a tooth brush. His cut off limit could be with specified pricing, type of brush (medium or soft bristle), cleaning efficiency as suggested by reviewers, the brand name etc. The patient chooses the tooth brush that has all attributes from his selected list and has no bad features.

ii. Disjunctive: The product, which falls above the cut -off point on any one of the attributes is selected. The patient choosing the tooth brush solely based on pricing.

iii. Lexicographic rule: Based on patient's preference, attribute ranking is done. If a brand of tooth brush gets ranked higher depending on pricing, it is then selected as brand of choice. In case there is a competition between two brands which has the same pricing, the next attribute which could be the type of brush, is considered.

IV. Purchase decision:

The purchase made could be of two types.

a. Trial purchase: Trial packets introduced by the manufacturer, generally of smaller quantity. This could be marketed as free sample or as trial coupon when another well-known product is bought along, it is given for trial use.

b. Repeat purchase: If the consumer is satisfied, he would buy the brand again or visit the same dental practice. Repeat purchase lead to product or clinic loyalty.

V. Post purchase outcome and reactions: It is of two stages.

1. Post purchase Cognitive Dissonance 14,15

A parent has got an electrical tooth brush to his child. After the purchase is made, he is uncertain if right purchase was done. Post purchase he gets in more information about the product, talks to dealer again to get reassurance, talks to other parents. This is generally noted when a high priced product or a product that cannot be exchanged is bought. In a clinical scenario a patient who replaced his missing tooth with implant might come back to dentist often to get reassurance. This is termed as Cognitive Dissonance. Purchase decision finally could be disrupted by negative feedback from others, level of motivation, to comply or accept others feedback [16] wherein opinion leaders plays a vital role.

2. Product Usage and reaction 17,18,19 Three situations can arise-

i. Performance meets expectations: It is a neutral feeling. When another patient asks his feedback about a practice, he may not give a negative review. Though his expectations are met, he may or may not recommend..

ii. Performance exceeds expectations: The patient is satisfied and it leads to a positive feeling. He would give a good review and recommend to other person.

iii. Performance falls short of expectations: Patient is dissatisfied leads to a negative feeling. The patient might express grievance, spread negativity about a practice and more importantly can resort to legal action.

Conclusion:

Creation of desired state of need than actual state of need is being used by most of the marketers- like need for sparkling white teeth. A dental clinic or a product is to be advertised in sites where people generally

access. The practice needs to be positioned and marketed well [20, 21] if it has to come into evoked set of the patient. Testimonials from the patient can enhance patient looking for reviews. With increasing number of cases under consumer protection act, the dentist is liable if expectation of patients fails him. Assurance to patient regarding longevity of a restoration, prosthesis or time taken in an Orthodontic treatment could reduce patient anxiety. More importantly patient's needs and concerns have to be addressed in a truthful, empathetic way. This could result in sustained faithful patients to our practice.

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