

Wake Up and Smell the Demographics

Dental academics among us have had a wild ride for years. First, there were the heights of the mid-'70s, when applications to dental schools spiked to nearly twice the number that might be considered "baseline." Dental schools expanded to accommodate this Baby Boom generation's demand for higher education. And then, we all saw the crash in the late '80s, when dental schools closed or reduced their class size as applications dropped and federal funds dried up. The entering dental school class of 1988 was only 63% the size of the entering class of 1978, 10 years earlier!

Those of us in the military saw the effects from the other end of the pipeline. When I entered the Navy in 1979, as a new dentist, I was literally told that I was "a dime a dozen" and most dentists were shunted out after their first tour. But by the mid '90s, the Navy was writing contracts for retired officers to treat patients, because there just weren't enough young dental graduates.

This shows up just as clearly in the demographics of the Academy of Operative Dentistry. There has always been a delay in dentists developing an interest in the Academy. Many people suggest that we try to attract dental students to join the Academy, but that simply has not been effective in the past. The truth, I believe, is that the academics among us are doing a very good job of developing good, solid, research-based, data-driven clinical information for students in the dental schools. The Academy's programs, which also deliver these goods, may not appear as value-added to students and recent graduates.

However, 10 to 15 years after graduation, things have changed. Graduates have attended practice-building lectures and feel more comfortable running the business end of their profession. They have looked in the throwaway journals to stay current and have found that the hype does not match their experience. They

have gone to the glitzy road shows and been dazzled, then found that they were not really sure what they were using and why.

That is when some of them find the Academy. Every year I talk to the new members, who are a little wary when they enter the New Members Breakfast, then enthusiastic at the Gala. Each year, they inspire me, because they are so excited about the quality of the programs. "Why haven't I heard about this meeting before?" they ask.

"Who brought you to the meeting?" I respond. They invariably point across the room to someone who has been telling them about it, and I usually hear that this person—this mentor—has been bugging them for several years to come. Many times it has been since dental school, but they were just not ready to hear about Academy meetings until a few years later.

So, back to the demographics. The Academy's membership and meeting attendance curve mirrors that of dental graduates, but with a 10-15 year delay. We thought that the growth in meeting attendance would continue, and we changed hotels to accommodate this growth in attendance, just as we topped out the curve. It is now 13 years since that lowest point in the dental school graduation curve, so it should be no surprise that our membership and meeting attendance have stalled. But, are we going to accept simply following the curve and allow the Academy to slip away?

The fact is that what was our reality then is not the current reality. We got very comfortable sitting back and waiting for members to come to us. But the demographics do not lie, and the numbers are not there. Like the Marines, we do not want everyone, but we do want a few good ones. We have to go get them, one by one and one on one.

We need to look at our strengths and do what we all know how to do... mentor good young dentists one on one. They are on your faculty, perhaps they are part-time faculty members. They are attending your continuing education classes. They are in your study clubs. They are in your practice. They are down the street, asking for your advice. You have to take a deep breath and tell them about the Academy and the value it can offer them. Maybe you will have to tell them many times; that is the way it usually works.

Occasionally, the suggestion comes up that we should advertise, but, apart from the significant cost, it simply will not convey who we are and what we do for the professionals we want to reach. The throwaway journals tell the tale: ads are filled with "leaders" who use their names and pictures to endorse products, because they know dentists respond to that. How much more powerful is it when a respected colleague makes a personal offer to sponsor a dentist for the Academy.

Remember what we have to offer: great value on an outstanding program, a chance to join the leaders in the profession and a warm, welcoming atmosphere. It is simple. Usually, when someone attends the meeting, he or she will come back again. An easy sell, if it is something you believe in.

Who will you mentor to the Academy this year?

Dr Jan Mitchell



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