

Environmental Surprises Amp Up Dental Visit Anxiety

by Dr. Katherine Grace Morris

I was going to do a consultation for a dental practice client. As part of my consultation, I want to know how a client experiences with the dental practice. This includes what I see en route to the office. How easy is it to find the office building while driving or walking, finding parking, and then locating the office within the building? Any of these experiences can be pleasant, neutral, stressful or a mix thereof. Each one of these emotions singly and cumulatively effect the patient *before* they get into the dental chair.

As I drove up the building, I saw a plaque on the building that was hard to read. I felt unsure that this was the right building. I expected to see a larger sign, but my expectations were not met. (Why this matters: The feelings generated *before* entering the office color how I view, and will recall, my experience with the practice.)

There was no sign at the front door for the dental office. Could I be in the wrong place? Oh no! Was I going to be late! I could feel my temperature rising. Neighboring buildings of the same design each had business names prominently displayed over the entranceway. This building did not. The glass entry doors were locked, which is highly uncommon for a commercial building in this area. I had to be in the wrong place. I dug in my handbag for my phone to check the address again. I was grateful it wasn't raining as I stood by the uncovered doorway. I really wanted to find this place through the address and not have to call the office and tell them I was lost. There was a button and keypad with no name on it. It seemed more like a residence than a commercial building, though architecturally it was clearly a business building. Peering inside, the marble floors, muted striped wall covering, and mahogany furniture I could see gave no indication of a dental office; the space looked more like a private banking firm or an upscale law firm. I rang the bell but got no response.

At this point, I felt I had to call the dental office and tell them I couldn't find them. Just as I was beginning to dial, a woman inside the office came to the door to let me in. I fully anticipated her telling me that I was at the wrong address. (At this point I am completely distracted from the reason for my visit to the practice, and consumed by feeling lost and trying to find the office. (Why this matters: changing mind states takes time and energy. Staying focused on one task at a time nets the best results, and is pleasurable and efficient from a brain perspective. My reptile brain was now running the show, so it would take time to transition to my mammalian thinking brain and truly calm down.)

It turns out that I was at the correct address. The dentist [not my client] who had designed this space was a design maven who used with silk wall coverings, elaborate crown moldings, expensive draperies, and furniture. Once inside the sprawling 9,000 square foot space, the lack of internal signage did little to lower my already high anxiety level. Was that a bathroom or a closet or a stairwell door? Where should I hang my coat? Which of the many hallways was I to go down when the dentist was ready to treat me? While I knew a staff person would eventually come to get me, in the interim no staff was available to help me locate the bathroom or water cooler; the feeling of being lost while outside of the building continued inside the building.

The experience was invaluable: I had experienced the obstacles and stressors patients would have as they tried to find this office and tried to find their way around once inside. The solution was obvious: place signs on the building that are visible from the curb, signs indicating how to get in to the office at the front door, and signs inside for waiting room, coat and rest rooms. Tell patients what to expect before they arrive. Orient them once they are inside by showing them where to hang their coat and the location of the rest room, etc. In this instance, adversity can be turned in to an opportunity to communicate how much you care about your patients; that you want them to have a positive low-stress experience when interacting with your practice, even with its challenges. (Why it matters: clinicians do not want to create any more discomfort in their patients than they have to. Anxious patients are harder to work on. Highly stressed patients are stressful for the clinical and administrative staff. Making simple changes to the environment, or addressing its limitations before the changes are made, will minimize patient anxiety and increase their sense of being cared for.)