

# From production to performance

## Solving the positioning dilemma in dental practice

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Organizations at the extremes of the service spectrums get the most attention. In the restaurant industry, fast-food outlets such as McDonald's and Taco Bell are examples of modern service production efficiency, while Charlie Trotter's in Chicago and Alain Ducasse's Restaurant Plaza Athénée in Paris are known for their great dining experiences. At either end of the spectrum in the financial services and consulting industry are the efficiency of tax preparation at H&R Block and the strategizing for major companies from the management consulting firm McKinsey and Company. In the hotel business, the French do-it-yourself chain, Hotel Formule 1, with its no-reception, no-porter, no-bar, no-restaurant (in fact, no-human-contact) business model, garners written attention and the "beyond five stars" hotels such as Burj Al Arab in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, are patronized by jet-setters. Institutions in the middle—the ordinary restaurants that do not serve fast food but that will not win Michelin stars, the legions of large and small consulting firms and the hotels that range from dreadful to pretty good—do not get as much attention. There is a good reason for this.

Organizations in the middle generally are in trouble. Marketing experts have argued that this is because they are "poorly positioned,"<sup>1</sup> but this is an oversimplification. In many cases, the problem cannot be fixed by using clever advertising or promotions or anything as straightforward as painting the building or getting new uniforms for the staff. The organizations at the ends of their industries' spectrums go beyond merely positioning themselves in their customers' minds. They

## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Thriving dental practices are excellent at providing a warm personal experience or are efficient, fast and cost-effective. Those that attempt to do both end up being mediocre at just about everything.

**Conclusions.** Introducing ideas from dramaturgy and service simultaneity in the services marketing literature, the authors provide a model for the conceptualization and redesign of the dental practice.

**Practice Implications.** Successful dental practices will be those that concentrate on low customization of activities in the back office or high customization of activities in the front office.

**Key Words.** Dental practice; dramaturgy; service factory; service theater.

*JADA 2006;137(9):1283-8.*

do much more to the service they use to deliver satisfaction to the market, and they are especially adept at streamlining processes in ways that deliver value to customers. This is regardless of whether the customers are hungry and on a budget or want to celebrate a special occasion. These processes can be identified and applied in any organization that delivers service. They certainly apply in dental practice.

In this article, we show dental practices how to apply some basic principles from operations management, services marketing and the theater to position themselves at one end of a spectrum or the other. We begin by noting two

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seemingly disparate observations from sociology and the services marketing literature. These observations permit the construction of a simple matrix that facilitates a classification of the everyday activities that occur in all dental practices. We then show how these activities can be compressed to allow one of two different but viable practice models to emerge. We also show why practices that are in the middle of the spectrum typically are less successful. Finally, we speculate on what this type of thinking will hold for the future of dental practice, raise some caveats and suggest next steps.

### FRONT STAGE AND BACKSTAGE

In the 1950s, sociologist Erving Goffman<sup>2</sup> said that as individuals we are torn between the desire to act spontaneously and the need to follow social expectations.

He contended that individual attempts to follow social expectations are best understood as theatrical performances (what has subsequently been referred to as “dramaturgy,” which is a theory that interprets individual behavior as the dramatic projection of a

chosen self). In these performances, people try to persuade others that they are consistent and stable people who play their social roles well. Extending the dramaturgical metaphor further, Goffman reasoned that the social world is composed of front stages, backstages and regions outside either the front stage or backstage areas that often are termed “offstage.” The front stage is the social region in which fixed and socially recognizable performances unfold. The backstage includes spaces in which the audience does not observe performers and in which performers can reveal facts and engage in actions that might otherwise undermine the integrity of a front-stage performance. Examples in dental practice might include the following: the patient experiences the dentist in clinical attire with dental operating loupes, gloves and a mask examining his or her teeth (front stage); the dentist waits for a radiograph in the backroom and scratches his or her nose while he or she does so (backstage, unobserved by the patient who might be put off if he or she saw this action); and the patient encounters the dentist in the supermarket on the weekend (offstage).

The dramaturgical perspective has gained much attention in the management literature<sup>3-6</sup>

and in the services marketing literature.<sup>7-9</sup>

Researchers and managers are concerned by the fact that employees in service settings are—in a real sense—performers in a drama, and that many dimensions of this interaction can affect the level of service the customer receives and the satisfaction he or she expresses. Hochschild<sup>10</sup> suggested that the term “emotional labor” be used to describe how employees in a service setting perform when they are required to feel, or at least project the appearance of feeling, particular emotions as they engage in job-related interactions. Dental practitioners may feel and show sympathy for a patient’s discomfort, but they are expected to demonstrate that they feel and show sympathy and expect it of themselves. This emotional labor can produce stress in a person who is

expected to perform, especially when his or her feelings are not necessarily genuine and are only acted.

From an organizational perspective, it probably is simpler to reduce Goffman’s<sup>2</sup> notions of front stage and backstage to what may be termed “front office” and “back office,” as these terms commonly

are used in the everyday language of many organizations. Front-office activities may be defined as those that happen in front of the customer and that the customer sees and is aware of. For example, restaurant customers may see servers taking orders and diners receiving their food. Back-office activities do not happen in front of customers and are not seen by customers when they are performed; however, they must occur if customers are to receive service. For example, in a hotel, customers generally do not see rooms being cleaned, supplies being ordered or room service food being prepared.

### SERVICE SIMULTANEITY AND CUSTOMIZATION

Services possess certain characteristics that physical goods do not.<sup>11</sup> Services are intangible, generally heterogeneous (their quality varies depending on who produces the service), perishable (the moment the capacity to produce the service is not used, the service perishes) and produced and consumed simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the first three characteristics of services can create problems for marketers of services that vendors of goods do not experience, the simultaneity of services gives

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