

Confessions of an advertising plastic surgeon

It started innocently enough. The College opened advertising for doctors as long as it was tastefully done. We could not say we were better than someone else, we could not show before-and-after pictures, and we could not print testimonials from happy patients.

For a few years before this, surgeons were already advertising. Complaints to the College were put on hold waiting for a change in bylaws. Surgeons advertised through beauty parlours, published pictures of their work in glossy magazines and printed fliers offering free second consultations. The public did not object – they seemed not to notice. The stage was set for open advertising by doctors.

I advertised as soon as I saw others doing it. Listing your special interests is like saying you are best at something. I put a discrete box in the yellow pages with a short list. The phone book came and I proudly turned to my ad. My pride turned to frustration in a second when I saw the ad next to mine. A plastic surgeon had an ad three times bigger than mine, and in four colours! Would patients go to the surgeon with the biggest ad? How high would my fees have to go to match my competitor? Do patients find their surgeons in the yellow pages? Enquiring minds want to know! At least mine did, because this was costing money.

I realized my city has 12 phone books, 24 with yellow pages. You pay for every listing. Maybe the telephone company invented fee for service!

Advertising worked though. Consultations increased. We asked everyone how they heard of me to find out if the ads were working. I noticed the patients who came in response to my ad seemed to be a certain type, and asked the same questions.

Twenty-year-olds asked how long I had been in practice. All asked how many operations I did in a year. Many said they planned to see at least five plastic surgeons.

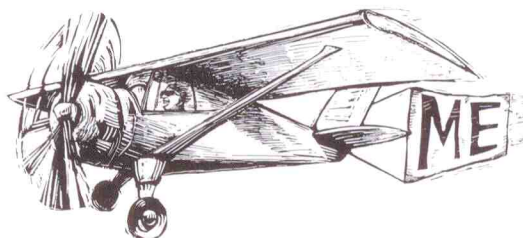
Where were they getting these questions? No answer ever satisfied them.

Some even asked, "Are you the best?" then thought I lacked confidence when I answered, "My colleague downtown is much better than I am at this operation."

Every explanation was met with the same unsmiling critical look. They seemed to be interviewing me to see if I was good enough to be their plastic surgeon.

These consultations were all much longer than usual and would eventually peter out, the patient putting down their notes, and annoyed they could not find that last critical question to ask me, the one that would help them decide that I was 'The One'.

I decided to become a Name. Being on a budget, since I now had less money to spend with all my advertising costs, I decided to become a name people could recognize. I took a media course. I took what I learned there, added what I already thought, and wrote a short list of media rules.



One: When the media calls, call back immediately. This was a little difficult one day when I called back after finishing an operation and they had already called someone else. What should I do, break scrub in the middle of a case? The nurses and anaesthetist wouldn't like it.

Two: No interview does you any good if they do not use your name. They won't use your name if they say, "We are just calling you for background."

Three: Information and entertainment is the same thing. A media interview is not a Fellowship oral. Write your lines in advance. They have to be short, snappy and memorable.

Four: The interviewer is your friend. You have been chosen because you will produce an interesting show. The interviewers want you to do well – it makes them look good.

Five: They want an ending with a punch. They want it to be a surprise to make it fresh, but they don't want you to be stumped. They will give you a hint before the show. The final question will be something like "How many operations has Michael Jackson had?" The producer will ask this before the show, and you will have time to prepare. "I don't know", is not a good answer. You are the expert – make one up.

Six: Avoid absolute words like 'truth', 'ridiculous' and 'stupid'. Listeners will remember your righteous indignation and think you are a jerk. They might be right.

Seven: A hostile interviewer with an agenda is rare. If a kind answer doesn't turn away wrath, try leaning back in your chair, laughing and not answering.

Eight: Enjoy the interview. This is not the Sermon on the Mount, this is entertainment. How you answer is as important as what you say. The medium is the message.

I tried out my rules on a few interviews and it went well until I went on the *Billy Show*. You may have heard of him. Billy wants to sell his show in the States. He tries hard to be outrageous. Sometimes he succeeds. The producer called me

a few days ahead for the Friday taping. The topic was "Women damaged by breast implants". Imagine 10 people sitting in the stage each one getting 30 seconds to speak, then audience questions, then a commercial.

"Breast implants ruined your life, didn't they," Billy said to a woman at the front. "Doctor Taylor, what do you say to that?"

I cleared my throat, shifted in the chair, looked away (all the wrong body language), and Billy said with a smile, "We'll be right back after this," and cut to a commercial.

He never asked me another question. I just sat there looking uncomfortable waiting for the next tough question that never came. Later I realized that was their plan. Get a plastic surgeon on the show, identify him and let him sit there so that people can see what a plastic surgeon looks like.

My media exposure was not going well. I phoned a public relations expert and had her come over. She showed me testimonials from lawyers, dentists and doctors.

"My practice doubled in a month"... "I had to hire another secretary to answer the phone" the letters said.

"We will put you in a glossy book sent free to forty

thousand of the most affluent households in the city. It will cost only \$8000." I looked at the book. The smiling face of one of my colleagues filled the page. Next to his write-up was an ad for a stereo store.

"I don't think so," I said.

The PR lady was getting frustrated with me.

"You need an advertorial," she said.

She showed me half a page from Canada's national magazine: "International reputation ... Specializes in helping unhappy patients ... Inventor of a new operation, so simple it can be done on a busy person's lunch hour ... Decorated by the government for his service to humanity."

I said "No."

I reached a conclusion. No more advertising. After all, if Pepsi and Coke advertise constantly, what chance do I have without a huge budget? As for the *Billy Show*, I think I'll leave that to others.

Better to spend the money trying to be a better plastic surgeon.

John R Taylor