



Palace Hotel.

The complete album accompanying this article can be found at <http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/miltoncontact/NRWManchesterDentalLaboratoriesMay08>

German Dental Laboratories inspect British Bulldogs' Teeth to gain Insight on Prospective Market

The 20 owner/managers of German dental laboratories discovered the benefits of personally visiting the British market and British Dental Association 2008 Exhibition in Manchester, exemplified by four key points.

1. How you describe yourself matters.

In a situation not unlike a rabbit sitting in the headlights, I found myself under the scrutiny of the German Dental Laboratory delegation as we began the day in the sumptuous surroundings of the Palace Hotel in Manchester. Any barriers were soon overcome as we tackled the all important features of how to introduce ourselves in a convincing and relaxed way. The challenge was to do this in 27 words or less, whilst getting our key memorable points across.

An immediate result was learning, that apparently natural transitions of words between two languages can mean a world of difference; whilst "Zahntechniker" is a respectable position in German, the translation to "Dental Technician" instinctively adopted was more appropriate to one of their assistants or trainees. Fortunately most were Owners, Managers or Directors of Dental Laboratories (or Dentists), providing a suitable alternative title.

2. Confident and proactive networking gets results

It is one thing to devise a pithy phrase, it is another to speak it sincerely; by practicing in groups we were able to iron out any stumbling points. Remembering four key questions to initiate a conversation - What do you do? What are you looking for at the exhibition? Do you have a business card? May I give you a leaflet/invitation to our stand? These gave everyone, even those with little or no English, sufficient confidence to enter the exhibition, approach total strangers and hold their own!

The delegates were soon putting their new found skills to good use at the BDA reception and exhibition stands they visited. British and German colleagues were exchanging views, techniques and experiences; from novel short implantation pins to veneers. I was very impressed when one of our delegates met a group of British dentists who, after a short introduction with regards to telescopic (German Crown) work, responded in clear terms that they would never do things in such a complicated way! Keeping cool, he took out one of his samples and, as the discussion continued, gently brought his English counterpart to concede that there might be a valid use for the technology.



Talking to other delegates



With Dr Booth at Total Dental Manchester

The unexpected consequence of newfound networking skills was some delegates actually entering Miss Manchester competition (though not as competitors!). This was taking place in the Palace hotel and the gate-crashing was justified with the cosmetic importance of good teeth. In fact, we had a temporary defection by two delegates to the Miss Manchester Dinner-gala, although to give them credit, they had unsuccessfully tried to get all of us invited! The rest of us made do that night in friendly conversation at a Mancunian/Chinese pub.

3. Attitudes and preferences are different in the UK market

Two visits to dental practices in Manchester had also been arranged by another colleague, Aura Green of Virtual Advantage. (Audra also ably supported Bernd Krey and his colleagues from the Handelskammer on the delegation's stand at the exhibition). We therefore set off on an adventurous journey by hired taxi convoy - unofficial motto "If it's not on the sat-nav, we can't find it".

Our first stop was Total Dental where we split into two teams for tours with the Practice Manager Linda McPherson and an informed talk by Dr Booth. He impressed with his foresight in building his fourth dental practice in an area about to be re-developed – in anticipation of future growth and raised the topic of the discerning UK patient – of which more below.

After another taxi ride, where three of us were initially left behind(!), we visited the Malthouse Dental Centre. Here Susie Laycock, Practice Manager described how referred patients visited independent specialists at the centre, who shared a common administration. Mr Greene, the Periodontist at the practice also related his experiences and took questions from the floor.

A common theme began to emerge, directly related to the UK's division of dental provision into either NHS or private treatment. With dentists tending to the latter, it was essentially a free market economy with three immediate consequences. First, the paying patients were more informed and demanding of the services provided, educated by internet and magazine articles. Second, treatments had to be fast and effective – to give customer satisfaction and ensure dentist's profitability. Third, in a demand economy and dearth of dentists, the market was priced considerably above that in Germany, where the insurance based system led to a price ceiling. In Germany this was driving the dental sector to higher standards and the adoption of advanced techniques through market competition.

The delegates found the theme confirmed in conversations with dentists and exhibitors at the BDA exhibition. Indeed the free nature of the highly profitable market and tendency for efficiency in a commercial environment was a continual thread. This was in marked contrast to NHS dentists who could not provide the costly higher end services and seemed inspired more by social responsibility than earnings in an environment that appeared to work against them.



Abandoned by taxi!



With Duncan Rudkin of GDC

4. Customers need to know about the product if they are to use it

Our delegation then discovered the fourth key element affecting their potential market opportunity – know-how. UK dentistry was coming out of a period where training and development in the sector had been significantly undervalued. Now there was an emphasis on training and standards, and it must have been a shock to our delegation to find that only now was there a significant effort to ensure quality standards and responsibility in British dental laboratories, as related to us by Duncan Rudkin, Chief Executive and Registrar of the GDC. The GDC were pushing through registration, soon to be legally required by all dental technicians, as part of this process. In fact, due to the standards and training required in Germany, German dental laboratories could register with the GDC in the UK, with appropriate evidence of course, using a simplified procedure.

Ulrike Matthesius, Education, of the BDA also chatted informally with the German visitors to illustrate the BDA's role with their membership base, the dentists.



Inside the BDA Exhibition Hall

The consequences of these factors and the difference between the UK and German markets were critical. What was taught and familiar in the UK did not include the details and practice of some of the high end methods routinely offered by the German dental system! The continual barrier our delegates encountered was limited or non-existent knowledge of the services they could provide.

The most significant of the four factors regarding possible market entry for German dental laboratories into the UK market was – if your customers do not know about your product – how can they demand your services?

Consequences

Some might argue that prior paper or internet research could have revealed the information gained by the visiting delegation. However, most of the delegates came away with a real feel for how different the UK is culturally and dentally from their own experience and environment in Germany. They would not have won the practical insights to assess their strategies for UK market entry in depth without the direct experience.

Summary

The delegation of German Dental Laboratories experienced the benefits of a visit to the UK through four key factors, from introducing yourself appropriately, confident networking, learning about different national attitudes in the dental



Delegation outside the Exhibition Centre

economy and the need for education of customers in order to generate demand. They also enjoyed themselves!

The success of the event was ensured by all the delegates, UK parties visited and the organisers Marie-Theres Lütje, International Trade Advisor, Chamber of Small Industries and Skilled Trades; Gabriele Roeder-Wolff Außenwirtschaftsberaterin/Kammerpartnerschaften, Handwerkskammer Dortmund; Bernd Krey, Cologne Chamber of Skilled Crafts and Small Industries; Mark Dodsworth, Director, Europartnerships; Audra Green, Director, Virtual Advantage; and Chris Thomas, Milton Contact Limited. The project was supported by Almut Schmitz – Head of International Affairs NRW International.

Call to Action

Where to now? There are two obvious routes to market entry for those German dental laboratories still interested in the UK; either become involved in education of the technologies so familiar to them or link up with UK partners already familiar with German practices such as German dentists active in the UK. Existing contacts in Germany and the UK are ready to help.

Author

Dr Chris Thomas
Director Milton Contact Ltd
www.miltoncontact.com

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