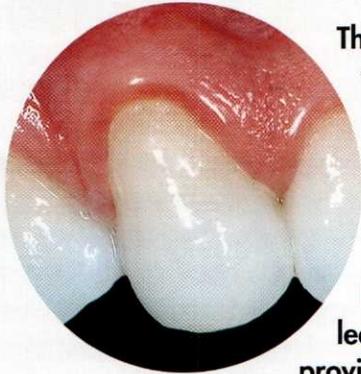


DD INTERVIEWS

MR. WAYNE PAYNE

Dental technician and Owner of Payne Dental Laboratory, San Clemente, CA



Those who lecture are frequently asked a common question, "How can I take the quality of my work from where it is today to where I would like it to be, and how long will it take to get there?" It would be easy to interview any number of well-known individuals and ask them how they got to where they are today, but somehow I felt the story would have more meaning coming from someone who has never given a course or lecture. After all, it is widely believed that giving courses and lectures builds credibility and creates a market for better clients and higher fees. The average technician does not teach or lecture and therefore, cannot take advantage of the exposure that lecturing provides. Yet this is precisely why this interview is so exciting. It is a story about an average technician, in an average lab with average fees, who made some extraordinary leaps in faith, technical competence and career satisfaction for himself and his laboratory. As we read through this interview, I am sure all of us can relate to many of the thoughts and experiences Wayne shares with us.

? dd.: Wayne, three years ago, you made a conscious decision to transform everything about your laboratory. Before we talk about that transformation and how you got there, tell us a little bit about what your old laboratory was like.

Wayne: I had four employees, all of whom are still with us today. We worked with about twenty clients, most of them local. The basic crown fee was \$70 per unit. We provided your basic two-powder ceramic restoration. Most of which was color matched to the shade guide.

? dd: Were you seeing many patients for custom shade matches?

Wayne: It was very rare that we saw a patient to take a custom shade and we never received photographs from our clients either. Most of our prescriptions called for an A2 or A3 shade, except for a couple of our East-Coast doctors, who live where it is cloudy or

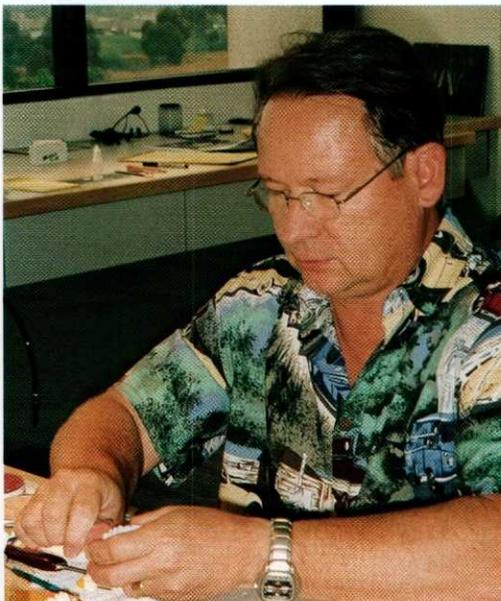
overcast, they typically asked for a D3 shade. Needless to say we always kept a large stock of A2 and A3 porcelain handy. The most difficult thing was the single central crown, because we did not see the patients and we did not receive photographs. We almost always had to make it two or three times before it was acceptable. The lack of input from the dentist severely handicapped us in getting a good match, but of course we were expected to do all the additional trys for free.

? dd: Did you ever get to see the work after it was put in?

Wayne: No. We never received a picture of the work or saw the patient after cementation of the crown. We would call and ask how the case went. The front office personnel would say, "Oh, it was great, the patient is happy, etc." But this was nothing that we could build on. There was no connection between the thought process we used for building the crowns and what the final results were. There was no validation or contrary evidence that our thought process was right or wrong. In short we were not learning anything.

? dd: How many crowns a day were you doing?

Wayne: We were doing 10-15 crowns per day. I always had a desire to make teeth, but the situation and clientele only called for crowns.



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? dd: If you were charging \$70 per crown, three years ago, what were you charging 10 years before that?

Wayne: 13 years ago, our price was \$68.00 per crown, so over a ten-year period our price only increased \$2 per crown. The cost of living was always climbing but competition kept the lid on crown prices. On the surface we were making the same amount each year, but in reality because of inflation we were going backwards.

? dd: In your interaction with other labs in your area did you find that everyone's prices were about the same?

Wayne: Yes, everyone was trying to stay price competitive. But you used the word "interaction" when describing my relations with other labs; I would like to address that. Most of the labs were always nervous when I would visit them, as if I were looking to steal their accounts, maybe they thought I wanted to exchange my \$70 crowns for their \$70 crowns! It was absolutely crazy, everyone living in fear of each other, I was depressed and I really wanted to get out of dental technology.

? dd: What was it about dental technology that was so depressing?

Wayne: At \$70 per crown there isn't much motivation beyond producing units. Add to that the fact that you have to produce so many units in a day to make any money. Then there is always the pressure of due dates and the uneven flow of work that comes into the lab. The quality of the preparations and the poor impressions only add to the misery. And to top it all off, there is the typical relationship most labs have with their clients. Let's just say relationships of mutual need don't necessarily create relationships based on mutual respect. All of those elements just wear you down mentally and emotionally. Under those circumstances your not looking to put your heart and soul into your work, you're just going through the motions, every day on every case.

? dd: Describe that relationship between you and your clientele three years ago.

Wayne: I was respected for getting the product delivered on time and that it usually went in without much difficulty. But knocking out units was boring to me. Whenever I took a class and tried to incorporate new things most of my doctors would say, "yeah it was very nice, and I would not mind getting this on every crown, but not if I have to pay more for it." Take a simple thing like the porcelain butt margin, it makes a tremendous difference esthetically, however most dentists don't want to spend an extra \$20 or \$30 to get it.

? dd: Were most of the negative reactions from your clientele about your additional efforts dollar-related?

Wayne: Yes, it was all about money. Every time I tried to improve my work the dentist would ask, "How much more is this going to cost me?"

? dd: What about your daily contact, if you had a question about a case, were your clients readily accessible to answer your questions?

Wayne: No, they almost never came to the phone at the time of the call and would often call back at the end of the day or the following day. Sometimes two or three calls would be necessary before we could get an answer to a question.

? dd: What types of questions did you typically have?

Wayne: Most of the questions were related to poor impressions or inadequate preparations, and almost without exception they would tell me to do my best with what I had. I would let them know that if it did not work, there would be an additional charge, for most of them that was fine. They preferred the possibility of an additional charge over the certainty of additional chair time. But I made it clear that I was not going to be taken advantage of financially.

? dd: What kind of input did you have with your dentists when it came to treatment planning a case?

Wayne: I had three accounts that were involved in study groups with Dr. Bob Lee at the University of Loma Linda. Dr. Lee had always stressed the importance of having input from the dental technician on treatment planning, crown types, material selection, etc. With these dentists I had an open dialogue on a variety of issues concerning their cases. With everyone else it was basic stuff, for the most part it was, "do crown, A3." Even on the more extensive anterior cases I got very little, if any, additional information to work with.

? dd: You mentioned that you were depressed and considered getting out of the business. But you were busy and obviously making money with your lab so this was not a money issue?

Wayne: No, it was not about money, I was making a good living but it was very frustrating to feel like I was going nowhere, every day the same thing. I felt like I could do more, that I would like to make teeth not crowns but I did not know how to get involved with dentists who felt the same way, so I just plodded along.

? dd: What was the turning point for you?

Wayne: Actually, my father-in-law was having some dentistry done and he told his doctor he wanted me to do the lab work. His doctor was a very discerning guy who was definitely looking for something other than usual and customary work. He had a very satisfying relationship with his lab so he was very hesitant to let me make the restorations. But my father-in-law insisted, so this dentist called me. We talked about expectations and how we should proceed with the case and he was comfortable enough to let me give it a go. When the case was finished he was impressed by what I had done and he really gave me a lot of encouragement. He convinced me I should get involved with some continuing education courses to refine my skills. I took his advice and began to look into hands-on courses and lectures. I was blown away by what I had seen and I was convinced this was the direction I wanted to go. That was a little more than three years ago. Today that doctor is one of my best clients.

? dd: Did this new dentist become a resource for other clients that were like-minded?

Wayne: By focusing on this new client and developing my skills and the skills of my lab personnel, we started receiving some interest from others. These referrals of course were looking for the same kind of

quality our new dentist was looking for. We continued to nurture these new accounts. Simultaneously we were taking advantage of every education opportunity that came our way. The better we got, the more we were able to raise our fees. Many of our old accounts were not interested in our new direction and fell by the wayside. But it didn't matter because we just kept picking up new clients who were being referred to us. Some of the old clients caught the fever and have come along for the ride. Today we service about ten dentists of which two were with us in the old lab at \$70 per crown.

? dd: What about the atmosphere of your old laboratory compared to the one you have today, the physical space?

Wayne: My old lab was very small, about 600-700 sq. ft. It was very clean and neat but it was tight. It was not the kind of place that inspired you to come to work every day.



? dd: The environment that you have created in your new lab is open and free flowing. You have a wall of glass that looks out over the ocean in the distance and the feeling is calm and inviting. How much of the environment that you have created here was inspired by the changes you have been through in the last three years and how you view dental technology today?

Wayne: The changes that I have gone through have had a big influence on the design of the new laboratory. We have more than three times the space for the same number of people. More room, more freedom, more individuality and a more creative environment, and I believe all of these qualities are incorporated into our work now.

? dd: You have a son who recently graduated from college, who is now working with you in the laboratory. Was this something he always wanted to do or is this something new?

Wayne: Three or four years ago there was no way he would have considered working in the dental lab industry. As a college graduate he has many career choices available to him. But he has watched the evolution that we have gone through and he has become very interested in the career possibilities he now sees. I am sure that my newfound enthusiasm for my profession has influenced his perception as well. There are a lot of motivated, intelligent, career-oriented young people coming out of school who are looking at their career options. Dental technology has always found it difficult to access those individuals because they do not see dental technology as a career, they see it as a job. If they have any exposure to dental technology at all it is usually by happenstance and not by design. In general, most people who look into dental technology see very few career opportunities or growth potential within the profession. Somehow we have to begin a campaign to educate high school and college students on the career opportunities within our profession. I think that this represents a monumental task because we seem to have a difficult time getting the message out amongst ourselves. I was in this profession for 20 years before I was made aware that there were more ways to do this than the way I was taught. I think most people are too busy trying to get their work done and they don't have the time to see other possibilities, I know I was.

? dd: You said that this lab has more space than the previous one, certainly that has changed the feeling all of you have when working here. Compare the old lab environment with the new one in terms of productivity.

Wayne: The old lab was designed for cases to flow seamlessly from one bench top to the next. Everything was designed to make us more productive. But productivity creates its own stress. I don't think there is a lab technician out there who isn't under constant stress because of the need to produce a certain number of crowns per day and the due date factor only adds to that stress. Everything we have done here, in the new lab, is looser in some way. We still need to be productive and efficient, but we have found that an environment that is more relaxed with more freedom and less stress has actually made our technicians more productive. I have the same staff today I had in the old laboratory. I have had a chance to see them in both environments and they are different people today. They are more quality conscious, more motivated to learn and improve, more team-oriented and generally just



happier to be here. If I had to categorize it, I would say they have changed from being strictly production-minded to being career-minded. They no longer see it as a 9:00 to 5:00 job they have to go to; it is a career that they are truly excited about. They are proud of where they are and what they are doing.

? dd: You have said that in the past you did 10-15 crowns per day. Today you schedule 10 a day. Typically, laboratories receive a case with a predetermined due date from the dentist. Some times it is 10 units in a day, other times you may have 30 or 40 units due that day. How do these fluctuations in work volume effect the quality of the work?

Wayne: It is an impossible task to control the quality when you have more work than you know you can finish in a day. You have to be able to control the workflow and take time to be creative. If one day your technicians must finish 30 units, you can be sure that the quality will not measure up to the quality those same technicians will do on a day when they only have 10 crowns to make. So getting control of the workflow is the very first step in changing the direction of the quality.

? dd: What are some of the other important elements of turning things around?

Wayne: Don't give into your old ways, stay on target. New ideas and new techniques take additional time to learn and implement. But in time your proficiency level rises and you get faster. When you're pressed for time, the temptation is to go back to the old familiar ways because they are more comfortable to you. You also have to understand how to sell your clients on the value of your work. Also, I took a lot of courses where dentists and technicians learn together. This was huge for me because I really began to see and understand the clinical procedures and how important it is that the dentist / technician

team are on the same page. This not only excelled my learning, but it gave me a new respect for the difficulty of the clinical procedures.

? **dd: Many dentists are price conscious, how do you create awareness amongst your clients of the "Value" of your work rather than the "Price?"**

Wayne: The first thing we need to understand is what the true costs of doing business with a laboratory are. This is something that the dentists themselves don't often think about or understand. It's easy for a client to differentiate the price between one lab or another, but this does not really identify the "cost" of working with that lab. Chair time is one way of calculating the cost of a crown. Proximal and occlusal contacts, internal and marginal adaptation and accuracy of shade all effect the time it takes to deliver a restoration. Remakes or crowns that need further laboratory augmentation or adjustment create the need for additional chair time the dentist can not charge for. Ultimately, crowns that require little or no adjustment and no additional chair time are less costly than those that do; even if they are higher in price.

? **dd: Are there any additional benefits to your clients other than the time savings?**

Wayne: Because of the esthetics we can deliver to our clients today, our dentists are much more confident in their treatment planning. They know exactly what they can expect from us and this helps them to expand their treatment planning options with confidence. We have become a key source of information for our clients on various materials and crown types, which are available to them. We are regularly called upon to give input on cases during the treatment planning phase. An extensive knowledge of how all of the different materials work and under which conditions they perform best helps us to recommend restorations ideally suited to a particular case. The heavy investment we have made in our own education has made us a more reliable and informed dental partner.

? **dd: Have there been any other ways in which the quality of your work has benefited you and your clients?**

Wayne: Absolutely! Not only are our dentists ecstatic about what we are doing, so are their patients. A patient who enters a client's office and expresses a particular desire may require far more extensive treatment than they know. Often they are reluctant to accept additional treatment beyond their own perceived needs. Once the dentist delivers our work and the patient sees that it looks like their own natural teeth, they become very excited about having all of their old crowns replaced. Our work has

helped the dentist sell more restorative care. Also, when these patients are thrilled with their own work, they tell their friends and co-workers. Many of them will seek similar treatment from our clients, so their patient base grows as a direct result of our quality. In addition, the various dental professionals that our clients work with have also taken notice. When a patient who has received restorations from one of our clients visits the orthodontist, periodontist, endodontist or oral surgeon they are typically impressed by the work that has been done. Our clients have told us that their referrals have increased from these professionals, as a direct result of our work! Obviously all of these things have also helped us here in the laboratory as well. Many of our clients are singing our praises to their colleagues and this has resulted in increased interest in our services.

? **dd: How have you handled this increase in the demand for your work?**

Wayne: Well, as I said, we still have the same number of technicians working in our lab today as we did three years ago. So in the past three years we have not looked to increase the number of accounts we have, instead we have concentrated on increasing the number of clients whose focus is on quality. This approach has helped us to raise our crown fees from \$70 per unit to \$300 per unit. Along the way we have lost some of our dentists with insurance-based practices, but we have replaced all of them with clients who are fee-for-service and quality-oriented. We have reduced the number of crowns per day we do by almost one-third, but we have more than quadrupled our fees in the past three years. We have more than tripled our monthly gross while producing only two-thirds the volume of work. Combine this fact with the increases in employee self-esteem and job satisfaction and we are very excited about our future prospects.

? **dd: You clearly had an idea or goal in mind for your laboratory, how did you convince your staff to embrace your vision?**

Wayne: I presented my ideas and my visions to my staff and I told them about the plans for a new facility. I told them about the education and time required to reach this new level. I told them it was something we would have to do together, it wasn't something I could do alone. I told them I would be able to pay them more, etc. This empowered them to see and execute the vision I had for each of them and our laboratory, and that was fundamental to our success.

Wayne, thank you for the interview and we can't wait to see where you are three years from now! □