Bill is an enthusiastic general dentist, but you’d consider his dentistry to be adequate at best. He’s also an expert at marketing his practice among his colleagues. The holiday gifts he brings to you and the staff are impressive. He brought you a desk lamp one holiday season embossed with the name of your alma mater and the year you graduated from dental school. Shortly before Thanksgiving, he hired a waiter who rolled a pair of serving trays into your office with a 3-course luncheon for the entire office. He even charmed your business manager with a miniature Christmas tree 3 years ago to “thank her for her support.” Several years in a row, you’ve told him that you’d feel most comfortable with receiving just a greeting card at the holidays and special occasions. But he persists, however, sometimes even leaving generous gifts with the nighttime custodian so you cannot decline to accept them. You’re now at the point where his gifts make you feel uneasy. Compounding this sentiment is the fact that there are better dentists around, but whenever a patient or relative asks you for a referral for a general dentist, you feel obligated to refer to Bill—even though the level of his treatment is not the best there is.

Gift-giving instills an urge to reciprocate and is composed of 2 forms. Specific reciprocity induces the recipient to return a gift or favor to the giver. If your neighbor brings you a bottle of wine during the holidays, you feel compelled to do likewise. Generalized reciprocity instills the desire to pay forward to another unspecified individual whenever the future need arises. In this case, reciprocation is not defined at the time of giving but encourages the outlook for a future opportunity to be generous or helpful.

Giving is most appreciated when it is individualized and unpredictable. In a study of customer’s tipping habits in a restaurant, it was found that gratuities were increased by 3% when the waiter leaves a single mint candy with the bill. When 2 mints accompanied the tab, tipping increased by 14%. When the waiter included a single mint, walked away, and again approached the table with the statement, “For you nice people, here is an extra mint,” the tip increased an average of 23%. The investigators concluded that how a gift is given is more important than the gift itself.

There’s a difference in gifting between the intention to influence versus the intent to control. Influence is meant to induce a change in another’s behavior. An example might be a vendor gifting you with a few sets of brackets to encourage your future purchase of that brand. Or you might forgive your fee for a cone-beam scan for a patient who sees the dentist next door. Your motive is that the patient or the doctor will refer a new patient. The second form of gift-giving involves an attempt to dominate or control another’s behavior. Consider gifting someone, especially a potential customer, with an expensive product that can be serviced only by the same vendor that distributes the product. Gifting that is intended to control behavior is unpopular because it eliminates the autonomy to make one’s own decisions.

Human socialization involves reciprocation in gift-giving, as it is natural to feel compelled to reciprocate. But gift-giving can be used to exploit this tendency by distorting our judgment in making a free choice.

Your appreciation of Justin’s vulnerability as a patient should override your temptation to refer him to Bill in reciprocation for the gifts you received. If Justin won’t get the best care, gifting should not influence your decision as to who is the best dentist for him.

That gift from you to Justin will be more valuable than anything money can buy.

REFERENCES

