

Shaking the Foundations

Are orthodontic education and licensure ripe for disruption?



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As part of the 55th anniversary celebration of the Marquette University Orthodontic Department, I was asked to speak about my years of experience treating patients with Invisalign. While I was at the event, my discussions with past and present residents and students allowed me to reflect on all that has changed during my 35 years of practice; speaking with those who are older than I helped me appreciate those changes and ones in the foreseeable future.

The disruptions to the profession by the clear aligner market have affected not only the way we practice but also how we create our business models. This wasn't a planned change brought on by the profession; it was an external influence, created during the age of the millennials ... and is probably the first of many "canary in the coal mine" moments to come.

During the past 20 years, we've seen how changes in demographics, education and regulation have affected the way we practice. Are all of the highly regarded institutions that we interact with keeping up? If information is moving so quickly and causing us to practically change our

business model on a dime, can we rely on the same educational, regulatory and practice methods to serve our patients and of course ourselves?

Job changes—and changing jobs

If you Google "millennial" or look it up on Wikipedia, you will find this generation is the first to be brought up with computers, the least likely to be religious, and the most likely to change jobs and view their purchases from a different set of eyes.

Of my three millennial children, the youngest most typifies the mindset and work experience of this generation. Libby's first job out of college—all three attended Arizona State University, and I am a proud Sun Devil parent—was with Uber corporate, where she was charged with developing the Uber Eats program in Phoenix. I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say she installed software and onboarded restaurants that agreed to have their food picked up and delivered for a discount utilizing Uber drivers. We've used this service at the office on many occasions and it is truly amazing; for a small delivery fee, you can call pretty

much any restaurant that strikes your fancy, order online, and a time clock almost to the minute keeps you informed as to when the hot food will arrive at your reception desk. Uber extracts a percentage of the bill from the restaurant.

When the HQ elected to move to Dallas, Libby elected to stay in Phoenix. Her next stint was with GoDaddy, an internet web service company based in Scottsdale. (You may remember its edgy ads run during the Super Bowl featuring Danica Patrick and scantily clad women.) This job ended in less than a year, when she was forced with many of her colleagues to train her foreign replacements. Her particular job was in the financial department and one of her replacements asked her what "quarterly" meant! This is more common than many people think and it had the effect of hitting us at home.

Out of fatherly love and an attempt to keep my recently graduated daughter employed, she "temped" at my office for several months while I was in search of a front desk employee.

Appearing for her first day of work, she immediately placed her cell phone next to her keyboard, and she kept in touch with her contacts while taking care of her front desk duties (quite well, I might add.)

Fortunately, Libby was able to gain a foothold in another disruptive situation of a pretty traditional business. That would be as licensing director for a real estate lead generator that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to select brokers for buyers and sellers.

In our own profession, if we sell our practice to a buyer who's got years of education (and debt to prove it) ... we're still expected to hang around to "mentor" them to become successful.

Yup: Another way to use computers and technology to skim some excess profits out of a traditionally lucrative business. The business is doing well, profits are growing and traditional real estate brokers are calling to get involved.

Is this business model sounding familiar?

Demolishing “the old way”

It’s time to view education and regulation through the same lenses. Think about it: “Big Education” is doing things pretty much the same way since we can remember—doctors gradually work their way up the ladder of success with badges and branding until they’re too old, not motivated or out of money. Referendums are on practically every ballot; voters regularly are asked if we want to spend more money on “big” education. Yet, small business seems to shoulder an awful lot of the burden of training the graduates of these educational endeavors, whether they’ve earned a high school diploma or an advanced doctoral degree. It’s almost required that employers provide training to those graduates before they can truly be productive. In our own profession, if we sell our practice to a buyer who’s got years of education (and debt to prove it) ... we’re still expected to hang around to “mentor” them to become successful.

The licensure world bases its existence on regulating providers who’ve worked their way through the educational morass, only to be told that in order to maintain themselves in good standing, they need to continue to educate themselves, often using the same material that has kept many behind the curve.

We’re all too familiar with successful entrepreneurs who skipped or dropped out of college, only to disrupt previously sacred business models into a new way of “doing it.” My conclusion and prediction: It won’t be long before “big education” and “big regulation” become obsolete, because they’re unable to keep up with rapidly changing technology and practice and business methods.

Perhaps they already have! If you look around at the way you practice, how much of what you do was what you were “taught,” and how much is the result of disruptive technology, technique or practice? You’d think that we’d encourage—or force!—the large institutions that operate in traditional manners (and charging ever-higher fees and tuition) to become victim or beneficiaries of the same disruptive environment that we live and work in daily.

Market changes

By the way ... millennials are a completely different market from baby boomers and Generation X— and that’s OK! They’re bringing in new trends that will keep your business in the loop if you play your cards right. If you’re apprehensive or confused about how to get them to want to purchase from you, remember that you just need to be authentic, relatable and easy to reach. Then you’ll have them. This sounds easier that it is in practice — so keep your eye on issues of Orthotown, where in 2019 we’ll be covering topics like partnering with influencers (**p. xx**), musts for modern web-sites, social media strategies, online reviews and more. ■