

The hard **sell**

The idea of selling add-on dental treatments will leave a nasty taste in many dentists' mouths. But doing it right can benefit patients as well as business, as **Lucy Robertson** discovers

If savvy dentists designed their own dental units, they might build them like a stage, complete with sound equipment, lighting, and audio-visual props. After all, the chair is the engine room of the practice—it's where dentists most often close their sales.

Like it or not, dentists are the salesmen in healthcare, where diagnosing disease and finding a cure is only half the work. Convincing a patient to use a certain product or commit to additional treatment has now become a bigger hurdle, especially if the new service has little to do with the original reason the patient is there.

But mastering the art of add-on selling can provide a huge boost to business for dentists, as well as better results for patients.

From a regulatory standpoint, the rules governing what dentists can sell as part of an add-on dental product

seem largely commonsensical. The TGA prohibits the promotion of any scheduled or controlled substances by name, as well as the use of any unregistered product—regardless of how you sell it.

But in business, the art of selling products to patients is much more complicated and—in some cases—seems almost counterintuitive. Because pointing out a patient's dental problems and offering to fix them is unlikely to work for either party these days.

"Patients don't like the feeling that they're being sold to," says Michael Sernik, a principal at Sydney-based practice management consultancy, Prime Practice. "The biggest challenge is that dentists can see what needs to be done, but the patient can't.

"So, the dentist has an agenda to fix those health problems and prevent further ones developing, while the patient has an agenda to spend

as little as possible and get out of there. There's already a significant gap in understanding there," he explains.

Of course, many in the profession balk at the suggestion that salesmanship and business nous has anything to

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Dr Michael Sernik, Prime Practice

do with being a good dentist. Let alone a successful one.

Federal president of the ADIA, Pam Clark, singularly rejects that good dentistry involves anything more than providing necessary dental treatments in a medical

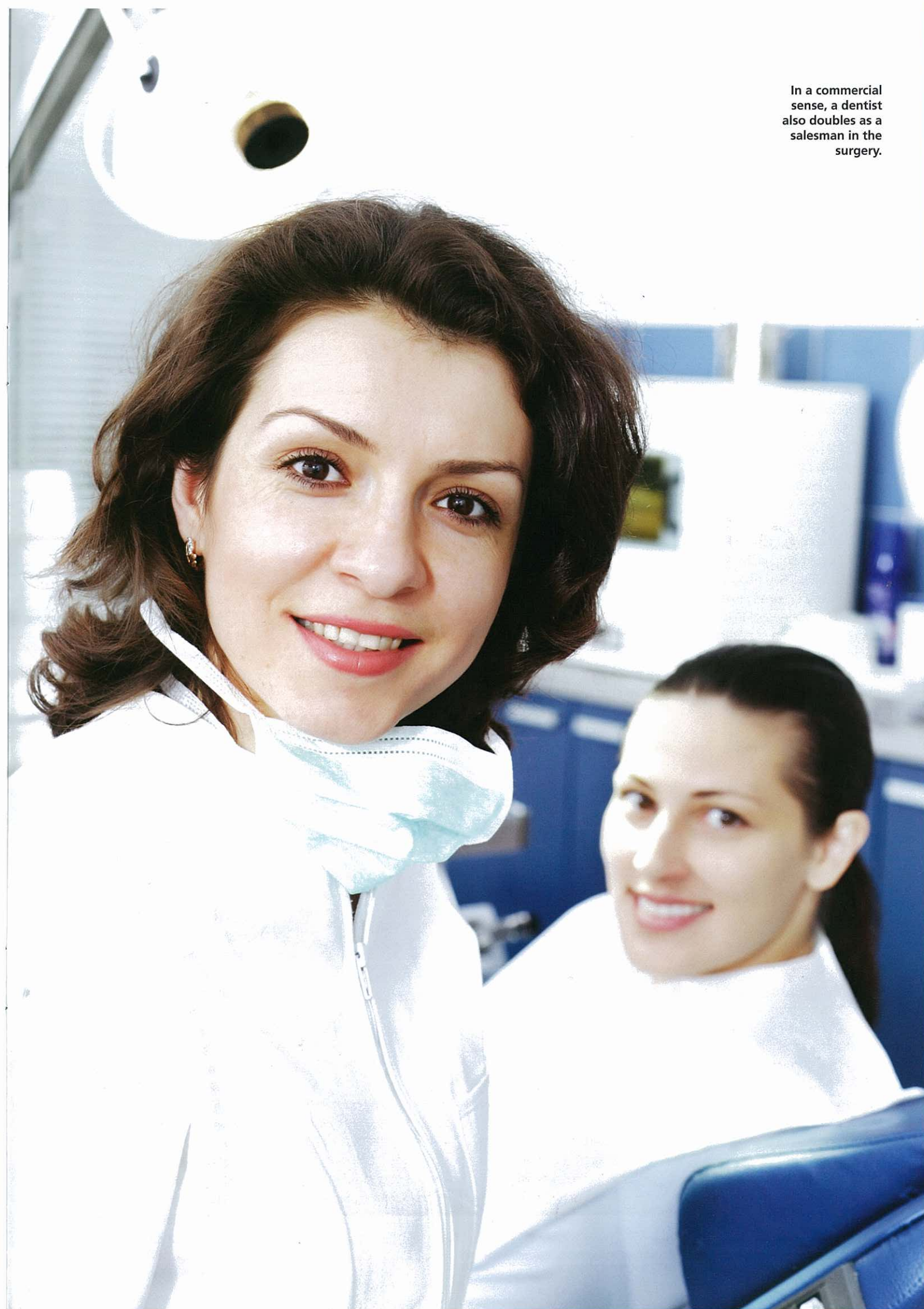
context. "Dentistry is not like McDonalds, where you are asked, 'do you want chips with that?'," she says.

"It is a healthcare service and dentists only recommend what is necessary in their professional opinion."

Randi Goda, director of Momentum Management, a dental practice management consulting company, says most dentists don't even like thinking of their practice as a business, and especially don't like the notion of being involved in selling.

"Dentists tend to find the idea of selling dirty," she says. "But, being diligent healthcare professionals, they are eager to promote optimum oral healthcare. So, rather than teaching dentists to "push" or "sell" their own agenda, we encourage them to focus on the needs and wants of the patient for the long-term and 'comprehensive treatment planning'." Consequently, by

In a commercial sense, a dentist also doubles as a salesman in the surgery.



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