

Build Your Brand: Know Yourself. Be Authentic. Advocate.



Self-awareness, authenticity, and professional advocacy can help dental hygienists shape their reputation, elevate their role in the practice, and make a lasting impact on patients and teams.

What is a brand? Ask a marketing professional, and they might describe it as how a company or product differentiates itself from competitors. With that definition in mind, consider another question: "What is a dental hygienist's brand?"

Lancette VanGuilder, BS, RDH, PHEDH, FADHA, president of the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA), has an answer: "I've always thought of your brand as your reputation in motion," she said. "It's what people say about you when you're not in the room. It's whether you're invited into the next room or the next conversation. And every single dental hygienist out there has already developed a personal brand."

Most hygienists aren't consciously building that brand. It's simply developed over time—in how they show up at work, interact with colleagues, build professional relationships, and care for their patients.

KNOW YOURSELF

"It's important for us to take ownership of how we show up," said VanGuilder, who believes she built her own brand by first understanding who she is. "We have to look at ourselves, know ourselves, and stay true to ourselves, and then show that to the world. Where things go awry is when you don't know yourself."

VanGuilder experienced that disconnect earlier in her career. "I loved being a hygienist. I'd already been in leadership, and I thought I was at the top of my game, but I wasn't feeling fulfilled and happy. I loved my patients, but something was still missing."

That realization led her to take the Clifton-

Strengths Assessment, formerly known as Strengths-Finder 2.0. The results were eye-opening.

"I remember reading the results and crying," she said, "because I realized I was in a work environment that wasn't allowing me to use my top five strengths, the first of which was futuristic."

At the time, she was working with a dentist who was preparing to retire, so he had little interest in looking to the future. "He was in status quo mode and I wanted to change the entire world of dentistry."

Although they had a strong working relationship, the environment didn't allow her to fully express her



5 Questions to Ask Yourself

Knowing yourself is key to how you show up professionally. VanGuilder asks hygienists to reflect on these questions:

1. Do you know your strengths and your purpose?
2. Are you investing in those strengths and purpose?
3. Are you taking classes, attending retreats, or joining associations or communities that support your growth?
4. Are you seeking help when needed?
5. Are you showing up consistently and applying your strengths in your work?

strengths. “I have to be future-focused to be happy and fulfilled,” she said. “So that was on me. I wasn’t showing up as my authentic self.”

VanGuilder also cautions hygienists against trying to emulate others. “There were periods in my life where I’d look up to other hygienists and want to be like them,” she said. “I realized that’s not right either. Don’t try to be like anybody else. Be the best version of yourself, be curious, bring forward solutions instead of talking about problems. That’s where I see hygienists have the opportunity to grow their brand.”

HYGIENISTS’ ROLE IN PRACTICE REPUTATION

When hygienists bring their true selves to work, they can have a meaningful impact on how a practice is perceived by patients and on its long-term success. VanGuilder pointed to several challenges facing healthcare today, including workplace culture and reimbursement pressures. “And patients, I think, are becoming a little more challenging than they used to be,” she said. “They have access to so much information.”

Hygienists can help practices navigate those challenges by stepping back and viewing dentistry within a broader context. “You’re not just going to work and owning your little part of the practice,” she said. “Dental hygienists are part of a much bigger picture. That takes open communication and problem solving. It requires speaking up, finding solutions, and offering compromise when appropriate.”

Many hygienists have experienced returning from a continuing education course or professional meeting eager to implement a new product or service, only to encounter concerns about cost or time.

Reputation Through Advocacy and Mobility

Advocating for the profession can also strengthen a dental hygienist’s personal and professional brand. “We can’t expect legislators to know what we do and how important it is,” said VanGuilder. “It’s up to us to step up and communicate.”

VanGuilder pointed to issues such as hygienist autonomy and expanded career opportunities. “We want to be embedded in more settings, and we want more medical–dental integration,” she explained. “We also want the ability to move across state lines.”



The Dentist and Dental Hygienist Compact addresses that challenge by creating reciprocity to reduce license portability barriers. Twelve states have already passed the Compact, and 11 others are considering similar legislation. Information and advocacy resources are available at ddhcompact.org/toolkit.

“License portability plays a key role in standard of care, workforce stability, and recruitment and retention,” said VanGuilder. “Speaking up for autonomy and mobility builds our individual and professional brand.”

VanGuilder encourages hygienists to take ownership in those moments.

“It’s up to me, as the hygienist in this scenario, to find answers that address these obstacles,” she said. “Maybe we don’t create change overnight, but maybe we keep plugging away. We keep showing up, looking at the bigger picture, doing background research, and communicating. This is how we shape better practice teams.”

GET INVOLVED

VanGuilder strongly advises dental hygienists to get involved in professional activities where they can build connections and continue growing.

“For 34 years, I’ve been involved in the ADHA, an association that has helped me learn and grow—through classes, wellness retreats, ergonomics sessions, leadership development, and mentoring,” she said. “My professional association is what’s given me these skills...which none of us learn in hygiene school.”

Ultimately, according to VanGuilder, community is essential to building a brand.

“It’s up to us after we graduate, and no matter how long we’ve been in practice, to find a community and a network,” she said. “I don’t think we can be our best alone.”