



The Importance of Lunch & Learns to Dental Students

A “lunch & learn” is when an outside speaker (typically a company representative) is granted access to a specified audience in a controlled setting. The speaker shares detailed information about products and services, while the audience enjoys lunch with their peers and the opportunity to be exposed to new resources and professional service/product providers.

For dental students across the country, attending a lunch & learn creates a safe environment to ask questions, analyze various products and make contacts with companies who they may choose to do business with in the future. Additionally, ASDA chapters often receive sponsorship revenue from vendors in exchange for the one-on-one relationship building that occurs with their future target market.

ASDA support of lunch & learns

It is the underlying belief of ASDA members that the importance of these programs extend far beyond sampling products or enjoying a free meal. Lunch & learns enable students to make informed choices about practice management and product selection, and to network within the dental community. Companies hosting lunch and learns provide support for local ASDA chapters, which ultimately promotes organized dentistry. Dental students are passionate about this issue and have adopted a formal policy to protect it. *E-10 Freedom to Invite Vendors/Speakers (2012)* states:

The American Student Dental Association encourages the administrators of all U.S. CODA-accredited dental schools to grant ASDA leaders the autonomy to select and invite dental supply companies and speakers to visit their school in order to heighten their knowledge and broaden their exposure to dental products prior to venturing into dental practice.

Chapter benefits

At a chapter level, lunch & learns provide tangible and intangible benefits to its members. Students appreciate the complimentary meal, but it’s the gathering as a community to learn and engage in group discussion with a product vendor that is the real attraction. As with any organization, the key to strengthening chapter involvement lies within the frequency of face-to-face meetings, idea-sharing, education and mentorship. Utilizing lunch & learns as regular gatherings of the local ASDA chapter not only generates interest from current members, but captivates students who may be considering joining in the future.

Benefits to students

1. Practice management and job placement resources

While several dental school curriculums present excellent resources related to practice management, many dental students feel underwhelmed. Lunch & learns promote this content in an enjoyable, interactive setting, offering further insight into the life of a practicing dentist. Students can learn about business-related topics, such as profit and loss analysis and hiring and firing of office staff in an informal group setting. The environment is geared more towards discussion than lecture, and offers exposure to a variety of company views and perspectives. Students appreciate having the opportunity to ask important questions upfront and formulate an educated decision.

In addition to providing practical business knowledge, lunch & learns offer an outlet for students to seek job opportunities post-graduation. With many options available to graduating dental students—residency programs, solo operations, corporate dental offices, associate opportunities, public health positions, and military contracts—it can be difficult to make a fully informed decision about postdoctoral commitments. Understanding each unique dental opportunity and the earning potential associated with it helps simplify career decisions for dental students.

2. “No cost” product education

It is often financially restrictive for a dental school to expose their students to all products on the market. Lunch & learns provide a venue for students to gain this valuable information at no cost to the school. ASDA members benefit from engaging with a variety of dental products that they may not otherwise know about outside of an academic setting. It would be a disservice if limitations were placed on the level or type of exposure of students to resources, products or potential vendors. Supplementing the dental school curriculum with exposure to current dental products can only benefit the student in becoming a successful practitioner upon graduation.

3. Learning in a controlled environment

After graduation, dentists are inundated with visits from representatives trying to sell their products or services. Without previous exposure to their sales techniques, it may be difficult for a new dentist to evaluate the validity of claims brought forth by sales representatives. A benefit of attending lunch & learns is the ability to discuss products and services and challenge claims amongst peers and dental school faculty. Evaluative skills are developed and fostered by experienced staff, and students learn how to question biased or invalid information. When students are unable to find the supporting evidence on their own, dental school faculty are available as resources.

After graduation, new dentists will no longer have dental school faculty available to assist in assessing the validity of sales presentations. It is important that students learn how to evaluate product claims early on so that they are fully prepared to do so when they are practicing dentists.

Pharm-free policy impact on dental students

Historically, lunch & learns have been an important component to the development of student health professionals. However, with the enactment of the pharm-free policy, many schools have started to ban or place limitations on these programs. While the policy was intended to protect the integrity of the pharmaceuticals industry, its impact on dental students has been dramatic.

A survey conducted by ASDA in which 75 percent of dental schools participated revealed that approximately 50 percent of dental schools have experienced some form of limitation on lunch & learn policy post-pharm-free enactment. Stipulations have affected the type of companies permitted on campus, the restraint of venues and products, and even the complete abolition of lunch & learns all together.

With the discrepancy between participating schools, it seems unusual that some do not allow their students to host lunch & learns, while others do. If each program strives to produce dentists of the same caliber, there is no consistency in who will graduate with or without learning this information before they leave the academic setting. The lack of opportunity may result in a population of students who are not as prepared for postdoctoral life.

Conclusion

It is the combination of imperative knowledge of dental products, the chance to meet as a community and a simple free meal that make lunch & learns a valuable member benefit to ASDA chapters. For this reason, ASDA will continue to encourage school administrators and chapters to support this type of program. It is our hope that after learning more about the student perspective, those reading this paper will support their local ASDA chapter in every attempt to educate its members and to promote the dental profession.