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## Goodie Bags: An important part of any practice



by **Cathy Hester Seckman, RDH**

If you're like me, you've been handing out goodie bags to patients since the first day of your first job. The goodie bag is as ubiquitous as prophy paste in most dental offices. Patients expect them, practice owners are used to providing them, and hygienists fill them by the hundreds.

Has that changed in your office? One office I heard about recently has cut back from an overflowing goodie bag to a single sample of floss. Another office has stopped buying imprinted plastic bags for their goodies and is making do with less-expensive zipper bags.

We're all faced with the very real need to cut back and conserve resources these days, but is it a good idea to cut back on the goodie bag? What message does that send to patients? If you've been used to receiving an imprinted goodie bag filled with dental products, how would you feel at your recare appointment if you were handed a 10-yard sample of floss instead?

Offering a goodie bag is not exactly advertising (creating awareness of a product, dentistry in this case), and it's not exactly marketing (creating demand for a product). What a goodie bag does best is help create goodwill toward your office. In business, goodwill is defined as "an intangible asset that provides a competitive advantage, such as a strong brand or reputation." (www.investorwords.com) The value of goodwill can't be underestimated. Goodwill is what keeps a family loyal to a dental home, and what spurs them to recommend your office to others.

"Look at everything they gave me at the dental office," someone might tell a friend. "They really care about their patients." In contrast, if a person comes home from a dental visit with a sample of floss instead of the usual goodie bag, the person might say, "Look what they're giving out at my dentist's now. Could they spare it?"

Providing premium care and demonstrating compassion and a willingness to help are primary reasons for patients to be happy at your office, but as a nice addition to that, who doesn't like to get presents? A patient who walks out of your office with a bag full of free goodies has an extra reason to be pleased with your service. That's never a bad thing.

### What should go in a goodie bag?

With careful and creative shopping, it's still possible to fill a goodie bag at a reasonable cost that can be considered a solid investment in goodwill.

What should be put in a goodie bag? I've been talking to every hygienist I meet to get an idea of bag contents. The first step in filling the bag is to decide on the message you want to convey. Is the bag only to provide oral health-care products? Is the bag to be used as a marketing tool to promote the practice? Do you fill the bag with an eye toward amusing and intriguing your patients?

The second step is customizing the bag. A new patient should get different goodies than a long-established one. A patient with compromised oral health needs more products than a patient with great hygiene. A businesswoman won't be interested in the products you put in a kindergartener's bag. Sometimes a bag might include only a toothbrush and toothpaste; at other times it might include a whole arsenal of innovative products; at still other times it might include fun and quirky goodies to make a patient smile. Here are some ideas for every purpose.

### The bag itself

Many dental product companies (see list in box) offer plastic goodie bags that can be imprinted with the practice name. Some have cartoon characters, some have built-in handles, and most come in different sizes. But zipper storage bags from the discount store or a party supply outlet work too, and they can be customized with inexpensive stickers or office address labels. I once temped at an office that recycled plastic headrest covers as goodie bags. At the end of the appointment, the hygienist took the headrest cover off the chair, filled it with take-home products, and handed it to the patient. If you're looking for a green option, pick up some brown paper lunch bags at the dollar store. They're sturdy enough to hold several items, and they're reusable and biodegradable. You can even make them more attractive with a bright ribbon tied around the top.

- **A toothbrush** — This is almost a requirement for a goodie bag, and patients come to expect and count on a free toothbrush with each recare visit. If your office has always offered this, it's not a good idea to stop now, but you can certainly compare prices and features and shop for specials. If you include a business card or imprinted refrigerator magnet in your goodie bag, nothing else needs to be imprinted. You can mix things up occasionally by offering travel toothbrushes or disposable toothbrushes.
- **Business cards/magnets** — These are a great idea, especially for new patients. Every office has business cards, and if you include one in a goodie bag there's no need to imprint anything else. You can actually buy a layered business card that has 12 yards of floss inside ([www.flosscard.com](http://www.flosscard.com)). They're a little pricey, but they make a powerful statement for a dental practice.
- **Floss** — How many of your patients floss regularly? According to polls, very few. Where do you suppose those tiny boxes of floss end up? I've asked patients what they do with floss samples, and here are some of their answers:

"I've got four or five of them in the bottom of my purse."

"I dunno, I think they just get thrown in a drawer in the bathroom."

"I used some to hang Christmas ornaments last year."

"I use the floss to tie my bra straps together when I wear T-back shirts."

"My kids take them to school for craft day."

Decide how important it is for your office to purchase floss samples for goodie bags. You might try offering specialty aids instead.

- **Specialty aids** — The possibilities are endless. You might offer one patient two or three specialty items, while the next patient might not need any. If you have a good sampling, you can pick and choose.

GUM Soft-Picks are a great choice for orthodontic patients, and Crest GLIDE floss holders are the perfect take-home goodie for people with arthritis. A teen with too much caries would benefit from samples of Spry xylitol chewing gum, which can be purchased in bulk at [www.xlear.com](http://www.xlear.com). A patient who suffers from dry mouth will appreciate Biotene samples, available at

www.biotene.com.

- **Mouth rinses, sprays** — Including a starter bottle of a specific mouth rinse or spray in a goodie bag can be a great adjunct to oral health instruction. If you'd like your patient to use chlorhexidine, a fluoride rinse, or a xylitol rinse, a free sample might be all the patient needs to develop a new habit.
- **Handouts, brochures** — If you have Internet access in the office, it's wonderful to be able to print off research papers or position papers that address particular issues. Dental product Web sites and dental/dental hygiene association Web sites are great sources of information, as are more consumer-oriented sites. Just be careful to consider the credentials of any Web site you recommend to patients.

If your office is like mine, it regularly receives packets of brochures meant for patients. Rather than throw them in a drawer, include one in each goodie bag. You never know which patient will be interested in the new line of power brushes or the new options for orthodontics.

- **Stickers, coloring books** — Most children love stickers and coloring books, and it's easy to find them with dental themes (see list below). These are an inexpensive way to give a child a gift and earn trust and goodwill. For a more serious message, Mr. Yuk poison information stickers are available at <http://www.chp.edu/CHP/poisoncenter>, and are a thoughtful addition to children's goodie bags.
- **Sand timers** — A humble plastic sand timer (available in bulk from Sherman Specialty Co.) is one of my favorite giveaways. Small children are fascinated by them, and they can add interest to toothbrushing time. When a child comes into the office with poor hygiene, one of my first questions is, "Where's your sand timer? You need to get it out and use it every time you brush." Busy, distracted adults can also benefit from timing their brushing.
- **Tongue scrapers** — There are metal ones, plastic ones, even disposable cardboard tongue scrapers. Some are two-handed, some are one-handed. Some are meant for adults, some come with cartoon animals embossed on the handle. There's a tongue scraper for everyone, and they're a little more unique than the usual toothbrush and paste.
- **Toothbrush covers** — It seems there are more styles of toothbrush covers than there are toothbrushes. You can choose a simple flip-top box for adult goodie bags, or a grinning green dinosaur head for kids' bags.
- **Lost tooth boxes** — These are great for children of a certain age. It can be hard for children to keep track of their tiny, slippery fragment of a baby tooth all day, and a cute little Tooth Fairy box or necklace can keep the tooth safe until bedtime.
- **Lip balm** — Mini tubes of lip balm are great giveaways in both winter and summer. Giggle Time Toy Co. offers several bulk selections with eccentric flavors such as Kiwi Lime and Tea Tree that will keep patients fascinated.
- **Photographs** — If you have a digital camera at the office, it's simple to give patients a photo of themselves taken during their appointment. This can be an important psychological tool, especially for a child's first visit. Children tend to remember the stressful part of a dental visit, not the fun part. If they can take home a picture of themselves squirting Daddy with the air/water syringe, or giggling at the feel of the prophyl cup on a fingernail, it reminds them that, "Oh, yeah, I had fun at the dentist's office!"
- **Coupons** — Dental product companies sometimes send discount coupons for an over-the-counter product such as a battery toothbrush or a mouth rinse. It's simple to put one of these in a goodie bag. Restaurant coupons are another occasional giveaway that you might be able to offer. Restaurants in my area sometimes send packs of coupons to local health-care offices.

Traditional promotional items: If your office decides to fill goodie bags with internal marketing items, you don't have to stick with dental products. Wall or pocket calendars, pens, and to-go cups can all be imprinted with a practice name. One hygienist told me her office gives out wallet cards that can be used to keep track of medications or blood pressure readings.

- **Oddball goodies** — How about tube squeezers? Remember those? At [www.smilemakers.com](http://www.smilemakers.com), you can get inexpensive toothpaste tube squeezers imprinted with the practice name. Lottery tickets are another unusual giveaway that patients appreciate for special occasion such as anniversaries and birthdays. I've heard of a few offices that present movie tickets or another gift to patients who have to wait longer than 15 minutes for an appointed time. Years ago, my mother saw a dentist who offered each patient a carnation at each visit. Sometimes orthodontic or pediatric offices give new patients a T-shirt imprinted with the practice name.

Debra Grant, RDH, who incorporates spa products with dental practice with her Oraspa program, fills Oraspa patients' bags with a bottle of water, an optimistic quotation, toothbrush, floss, a soy votive candle, Oraspa Essential Oil Sample blend, Oraspa Organic Beeswax Lip Balm, and something seasonal and calming such as a fall leaf, birthday balloon, shamrock, heart-shaped sticker, or pine sprig.

If customizing each goodie bag seems like too much work, you can always opt for a pre-made goodie bag. Practicon offers SmileGoods Patient Paks in 4" x 10" clear vinyl zipper bags filled with a toothbrush, floss, toothpaste, lip balm, and a sand timer. A pocket on the front of the bag can hold a business card.

Paradise Dental Supplies has similar products. Their orthodontic goodie bag includes an orthodontic toothbrush, a toothbrush cover, sand timer, wax, floss threaders, floss, a travel brush, and an interproximal brush.

Whether you decide to hand each patient a toothbrush on their way out the door, or customize an overflowing goodie bag for each patient, it's important to remember that you're not only providing tools for better home care, you're earning goodwill that will help your practice thrive.

### About the Author

**Cathy Hester Seckman, RDH, is a frequent contributor based in Calcutta, Ohio. Besides working in a pediatric dental practice, Seckman is a prolific freelance writer, a book indexer, and a speaker on dental and writing/indexing topics. She can be reached at [cathy@cathyseckman.com](mailto:cathy@cathyseckman.com).**

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### Catalogs with patient giveaways

- Bareham & Saunders, (800) 914-3464
- Flosscard, (800) 672-6229
- Giggle Time Toy Co., (800) 423-5198
- Paradise Dental Supplies Inc., (888) 774-0644
- Plak Smackers, (800) 558-6684
- Practicon, (800) 959-9505
- Professional Promotions, (800) 525-2990
- Sherman Specialty Co., (800) 645-6513
- SmileMakers, (888) 800-7645

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