

# ASHLEY LATTER

**ASHLEY LATTER** IS ONE OF THE DENTAL INDUSTRY'S LEADING TRAINERS AND CONSULTANTS. OVER 6,500 DENTAL PROFESSIONALS HAVE ATTENDED HIS 'ETHICAL SELLING' COURSE AND HIS INFLUENCE ON THE INDUSTRY CONTINUES TO GROW TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT HE HAS NOW BECOME A VERB! **LES JONES** WENT TO FIND OUT WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 'LATTERED'.



**BOD : Hi Ashley...So, let's start at the beginning – how did you get into business coaching and the dental industry?**

**AL :** Well, for 10 years I worked for the Dale Carnegie Training organisation, firstly as a salesman selling their courses, then as a trainer delivering courses on leadership, communications and particularly sales (which was my baby). I then became an international master trainer travelling around the world training people to become trainers for Dale Carnegie.

About 16 years ago I was delivering a two-day sales course in Manchester to a mixed group of businesses. Part of the group were two dentists and I was racking my brains as to why they would

want to take a course on selling with me. I found where they were staying and went over to meet them at their hotel.

I sat and chatted with the dentists for about three hours just fascinated by what they were telling me. They were with the NHS but wanted to leave and become more private. They could do high-end cosmetic dentistry but they just couldn't sell it. They couldn't communicate it. They were under-charging for their services and they couldn't close the deal. When they talked about treatments, it was all too technical. They took part in the course and were quite shy and reserved, and when they left they said thanks and off they went. →

Then one night, six weeks later, I was lying on my couch at home and I got to wondering about them. How they might be getting on following the course? I was in two minds as to whether I should ring them or not, because I wasn't sure if they had enjoyed it, and to be honest I thought I might get some bad news.

Anyway...I rang them. I basically couldn't get them off the phone. They were overwhelmed and so happy. Their treatment uptake had increased, they were doing more private work and their books were full. For the first time ever they were doing the work they had been trained to do but hadn't been able to.

We kept in touch, and then out of the blue they asked if I would deliver a couple of courses for fellow dentists they had spoken to. So I thought, yeah why not?

A few months later, with the help of Chris Barrow, we put on a two-day course in Oxford. We had twenty-six dentists in the room and it was just brilliant – an absolutely amazing experience. I kept in touch with all of the attendees and everything started from there. It was a slow burn at first; we did maybe three or four courses a year.

**BOD : You were still with Dale Carnegie at this point?**

**AL :** Yes I was still with them at the very start, but then I left. When I put my mind to it I realised that I could have something quite special. So, I left and started working full-time in the dental industry. I've been on my own for the last thirteen years now and in that time I've had over 6,500 people through my two-day programme and trained people all over the world.

**BOD : So from training two people, who happened to be dentists, you had a brand new career!**

**AL :** Yes, that's basically how it all started. Crazy isn't it? Now, in addition to the two-day programme, I do a reception course, an advanced communications programme and high-impact presentation courses. I do a lot of in-house courses and visit practices where I work with them on their selling skills, marketing and teach them world-class customer care. All sorts of different programmes specifically for the dental industry really.

**BOD : Presumably at that stage you knew your selling stuff, but nothing about the dental industry?**

**AL :** That's right. It was a fairly steep learning curve, as dentistry is such a unique industry. But I've found that the people that come on the courses are so appreciative. I literally get emails from people telling me that it's changed their lives and that, for the first time ever, they can deliver the dentistry that they've been trained to do. They often say that they wish they had been taught the skills at college or university. I love it. It's a fantastic industry!

**BOD : So, what do you think of the fact that dentists go through their university course learning how to be a dentist yet have very little support on how to run a dental practice?**

**AL :** It's amazing really. Communication skills are the single most important thing you can have. You can have loads of technical ability but if you can't build rapport with people or you can't ask the right type of questions to find out what they are looking for then you are going to struggle.

Too much technical speak from the dentist and the patient switches off as they don't understand what they are saying. So the dentists are taught all this technical stuff, but really 85-95% of their success in patients taking on treatment plans will be down to their communication skills. So it's a little crazy to think that they haven't been taught anything. But on the other hand, I can't complain as it has provided me with a living and long may it continue.

**BOD : So what is it about your approach that you think people respond to so much?**

**AL :** I don't lecture. I'm more focused on changing behaviour, getting people to do things that maybe before they couldn't do. It's a bit like learning how to drive a car. You can't learn how to drive a car by watching a video or being lectured at. You have to get behind the wheel, practise and get coached by the instructor. And that's what I do. I give people the techniques and strategies that work but then I practise with them and coach them so that they develop new skills, new attitudes and they can return to their dental practices with confidence and brand new behaviours that they didn't have before.

That's the main difference, and I do that by getting people to step outside their comfort zone and coach them on a 1-2-1 basis. The result is that it changes everything that they do.

**BOD : Many people go on courses and sit thinking, 'this is great, it's all making sense', but then struggle to implement it when they get back to the workplace. Do you think that's quite typical?**

**AL :** The difference between my course and most other courses is that people on my courses aren't sat down for more than five minutes. They are developing and practising new behaviours straight away. It's not unusual for a dentist or treatment coordinator to go back into the dental practice the next day and sign up thousands of pounds worth of treatment plans that they wouldn't have ever been able to do before. Once people have success with my courses, fairly quickly their confidence grows, attitudes change and their new behaviour is starting to be developed and they see it working.

Sometimes, things can dip a little because people fall back into old habits, but we do follow up and it's not unusual for some dentists to decide that they want a refresher every year to make sure they stay on track with their behaviour and their practice – a bit like advanced driving lessons I guess.

**BOD : What do you think about general dentists' approach/ attitude to investing into training in non-core CPD skills like communication. Do you find that sometimes they see it as a cost rather than an investment?**

**AL :** Yes, everyday! The most frustrating feedback that dentists give me when they take my course is, *'I wish I had done this programme five years ago when I first heard about it'*. That's about the average time a dentist takes to decide to do my course. So it is a barrier that I face, getting them to make that decision quicker and overcome their reluctance.

I find that once they come on the course, they realise the value and they are in profit, they keep coming back and they also send other key members of staff. I do find that all my business is from word of mouth now, which means I don't have to advertise.

**BOD : What's your take on the mood of the industry at the moment?**

**AL :** I hear views from two camps. I have conversations with some dentists who are really struggling to pay the bills and get patients in. But I also have conversations with dentists who are having record months and doing really well. I find that the ones who are doing well are those that are very proactive and make things happen – always thinking about their marketing, their customer care, looking for new ways of doing things and new treatments to offer to their patients.

You can't open the doors, switch on the lights and expect there to be a queue of people outside. You have to keep doing things to generate the business. But, without a doubt, there are many practices that are struggling at the moment. →

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**BOD : The 'Ashley Latter' brand is a positive presence in the market place, is it something that has happened naturally?**

**AL :** I get emails saying, 'We've been Lattered!'. I'm aware of my brand but I've worked really hard to build it. It's flattering to think I'm now a verb!

**BOD : So, where do you see the future of your business?**

**AL :** Well, I guess, it might get to the point where I can't be doing everything myself. There are some great opportunities in the UK and internationally, and to be honest I'm turning work away now as I can't make anymore room in my diary. If you had asked me two years ago, I definitely would have said 'it's just me', but now I've got my own training centre; it's opened my eyes to more possibilities. I do feel that the contract with the NHS will open up even more opportunities, so I'm not settling down just yet.

**BOD : So what would you say are the key challenges that face dentists at the moment?**

**AL :** NHS practices are facing rising costs, and the contract is asking them to do more for less. In general, practices are telling me that the patients aren't coming in like they used to, so they want to know how they get them to re-book. All of a sudden, dental practices are having to learn how to market themselves.

**BOD: As someone who dishes out ideas and best practice, what's the best piece of advice that you have ever been given?**

**AL :** Well I have two. When I first started working for Dale Carnegie I was paid on results only and in the first year I was struggling. I happened to go to America for a seminar and the best lesson I learned was, 'Stop selling courses, find out what clients want and then sell solutions'. What I had been trying to do was sell courses, not the training solutions. It's something that dentists do all the time; they try to sell the features of the brace, rather than selling the benefits a brace could bring to a patient's emotional problem.

The second piece of advice was, 'to do something everyday to promote your business'. I do this, it's my motto. I'm not saying I don't have Christmas Day off, but the other days of the year, I do something every single day. For instance, I'll Facebook message, or tweet. I might send a newsletter out, write an article or attend networking events.

Basically, I do something every day to market my business. It's something I think every practice could learn from.

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**BOD : Changing tack for a minute...who have been your key influences?**

**AL :** I had a great mentor when I was at Dale Carnegie, a guy called Dave Grandage. He worked with me on a day-to-day basis. He had a belief in me when I think everyone else didn't. In the dental industry, people like Chris Barrow inspire me. Otherwise, I'm taking in thoughts and great ideas from gurus from around the world all the time. There's always a CD in my car and always a book on the go at the side of my bed.

**BOD : What would be your predictions for the future of the dental industry?**

**AL :** I think that the corporate practices are going to get bigger. I think that the NHS practices are going to want to leave the 'more for less' culture behind and look to go private and offer different things. I think the cosmetic market is going to continue to significantly grow, as I have clients already who are breaking records with cosmetic treatment.

And I think that practices are going to have to provide a unique world-class customer experience that is completely different in order to survive. Practices are going to have to realise that they must be proactive, good communicators, and the whole team have to be singing from the same hymn sheet. If they don't, they will struggle.

**BOD : You're writing another book, what's it all about?**

**AL :** It's about money. I'm generalising here, but I personally don't think dentists are good with numbers. There is a perception that dentists overcharge and rip people off. I actually think that the vast majority are not charging what they are worth and suffer from low self-esteem. They have serious problems talking about costs, sometimes they think of a number in their head, but what comes out of their mouth can be 20% less. My book is all about strategies to get dentists and their team members feeling comfortable about talking money. I am hoping that my book will help dental teams out.

**BOD : You're the key speaker on Practice Plan's current workshop tour. If we wanted to tease people with what they can look forward to on the day, what would you tell them?**

**AL :** We are visiting eleven cities and offering twelve dates and we will be working a lot on communication skills as a team. I'll be sharing my experience and highlighting the mistakes that dental practices often make. I deliver over one hundred course dates a year and I have a wealth of ideas and knowledge of what some of the best dental practices are doing. All of this is going into the pot and we are going to end up with some fantastic insights and unique ideas that practices can use to help market themselves and grow turnover and sales. In a nutshell, there is something for everyone to learn from, and I encourage the whole team to find the time to come as they will all be singing from the same hymn sheet when they get back to the practice. ●