



BIXA

Michigan Dental Association Interview Findings

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Research objectives

This research study focused on four key objectives

- Identify what motivates young dentists to join MDA
- Examine career challenges and barriers to enrollment
- Assess the value alignment between young dentists/dental students and MDA
- Recommend actions for MDA to increase enrollment and involvement among young dentists

(any recommendations at this stage are considered concepts that we will test in the focus groups for resonance)



Interview methodology

In-depth interviews were facilitated with 20 young dentists/dental students

The Bixa team facilitated discussions with 7 MDA members, 7 dental students, and 6 non-members. Questions probed into pain points in early-career dentists, brand perceptions of MDA, and how these audience segments make decisions about joining and renewing their memberships. We dove deep into values, career aspirations, and sense of belonging.

To analyze the data, we coded all interviews line-by-line, looking for data that answered the research questions established during our kickoff meeting. We also used a secondary holistic approach to studying the interviews by identifying themes. This method allowed us to synthesize data to find commonalities and differences – and understand varying audience personas.

Recommendations based on 4 pillars of MDA membership were created to facilitate discussion in focus groups, which is the next step in our research process.

Summary of Key Findings

What motivates young dentists to join MDA?

- Obligation as a dentist
- Encouragement from mentors
- Seeking support as a new dentist
- Cultivating a professional network
- Commitment signaling

These motivators all tie back to social and emotional goals. Yet, when asked to describe benefits of MDA, young dentists and dental students really can only think to mention insurance and CE credits.

This indicates that MDA is struggling to make an emotional connection with young dentists.

What are the values of young dentists, and how do these values align with MDA?

- Young dentists prize values like honesty, integrity, reliability, family, and faith.
- Respondents lack a personal connection to MDA and therefore struggle to identify any real values the organization holds.
- Members do not feel a sense of belonging or community within MDA.
- To establish this connection, MDA must be more explicit about its values through benefits, established in four pillars.

What are the pain points related to signing up or renewing memberships?

- **Cost-for-value** is the main pain point in the joining/renewing process. Even current members feel little to no benefit for their membership; most stay because they have a free membership or they think it's what they are supposed to do. This is a result of a lack of emotional connection with MDA.
- **Time and distance.** Members tell us they have very busy schedules and don't have time to participate in events. MDA offerings need to be impactful to their career growth and personal growth and enhance authentic relationships so participants will prioritize becoming more active.
- **Cultural attitudes** toward age come into play. Respondents cited a stodgy culture in dentistry carrying over to MDA. Attending an event, they feel stereotyped as dentists lacking experience and competency.

MDA audience segments

While the three demographic profiles of members and potential members are dental students, dentists who are members and dentists who are non-members, audience segmentation shows four different target personas based on psychographic drivers.



Dan Dutiful

TARGET

Dan Dutiful will always be a member of MDA. He may not feel a personal connection or benefit, but he believes it is important to show comradery and loyalty with the larger dental community. He assumes that without his membership, more senior colleagues might look at him as a freeloader.

MDA does not need to worry about Dan Dutiful, but he would still benefit from an increase in targeted offerings, as he feels no real connection to the organization other than duty.



Sam Support

TARGET

Sam Support knows being a dentist is draining. She sees patients all day who are scared of her and down right say they “hate” her. She also understands that her fellow dentists and dental students are in the same boat. She’s looking for support for herself and those around her. She utilizes Facebook groups for dentists, her friend network, and her mentor (who she carefully selected) to provide her with support, but it still comes up short sometimes. She needs an organization that can create a real impact in how she feels.



Indigo Involvement

TARGET

Indigo Involvement is usually highly active with her interests. She often takes on leadership roles, signs up for committees, and volunteers for causes she cares about. She has many competing interests and, as a young dental professional, doesn’t have a lot of time. She’ll commit to something she feels a real emotional pull toward and has the right motivation. If she can get just the right push, she’ll join and be involved. This persona is an influencer and can be effective in getting other young dentists to join and be active.



Blake Blasé

Blake Blasé does his job day-in and day-out. He’s good at what he does, but he finds fulfillment and connection outside of his career. His priorities don’t coincide with being a part of membership organization. He doesn’t have an issue getting access to the resources that he needs, Blake Blasé really doesn’t have an interest in joining or being active in the MDA.

Whatever the MDA could offer him, he feels that he could find that on his own or through his existing network.

DAN DUTIFUL



I will always be a member, no matter what.

Dan Dutiful is a proud member of the MDA, and he will always be a member of the MDA. He doesn't feel a personal connection to the organization or any benefit from his membership. He is okay with that because he feels a higher calling when it comes to his membership. Dan Dutiful prefers a group practice, and looks to own one himself eventually. This collegiate atmosphere provides him with resources for his career and business operations. He has a strong tie to his mentor, and she's a pivotal part of the decisions he makes in his early career.

WHY DAN DUTIFUL JOINS THE MDA

It may seem perplexing that Dan Dutiful is willing to pay a substantial amount to be a part of an organization he doesn't feel a connection to or get a benefit from. However, he sees his membership as a way to buy a sense of belonging to the dental community in Michigan. He has heard from his owner-dentist and mentor that MDA does good work to help out dentists who need the support of the organization, though he's not sure how MDA does that. That's good enough for him to pledge his membership for life.

DAN DUTIFUL'S VALUES

- Loyalty
- Trust
- Commitment
- Honesty
- Solidarity

MAJOR CHALLENGES

- He has trouble connecting with his patients and delivering diagnoses and treatment information with emotional support for the patient.
- While he sees a future owning a practice, he doesn't necessarily understand everything that will go not creating that vision, especially business operations.
- He feels the stress that comes with the job, but it's not something that impacts his mental health.

DAN DUTIFUL'S COMMUNITIES

- Dental practice
- Family
- Faith-based organizations

HOW DAN DUTIFUL VIEWS MDA

- It doesn't provide any personal benefit.
- MDA isn't worth the money.
- MDA stands as a symbol for Michigan dentists as a collective. Therefore, it is a vital organization due to its symbolism, not its benefits.

WHAT DAN DUTIFUL NEEDS

- He would benefit from courses and short webinars on soft skills, such as patient communication.
- Personalized career planning support (may be mentorship)
- Push to focus on his career (accountability groups)
- More robust network

TARGET

INDIGO INVOLVEMENT



I planned to be active in MDA, but I just can't find the time.

Indigo Involvement is enthusiastic about her doing everything. She has always been involved with groups and causes that give her purpose, meaning, and speak to her values. From undergrad through dental school, she was always the first to volunteer and run for leadership positions. She was hoping that would continue when she started her career as a dentist, but she hasn't been involved in the MDA. She really wants to be a part of MDA and feel a sense of community, but she just hasn't felt that spark yet. There's a risk of losing her membership when she has to pay more because if she lacks a feeling of community.

WHY INDIGO INVOLVEMENT JOINS THE MDA

Indigo Involvement joins the MDA with the intent of shaping it and being an active participant. She envisions herself taking on leadership roles and engaging her fellow dentists. She's not in MDA to attend a networking event. She's in MDA to plan a networking event, especially one that targets the groups of people with whom she has a personal connection.

She wants to be a part of a community, but she can also help forge a sense of community by making sure the people she knows get involved too. When she has a stake in an event or committee, it must succeed.

INDIGO INVOLVEMENT'S VALUES

- Communication
- Joy
- Empathy
- Respect
- Inclusion

MAJOR CHALLENGES

- Indigo Involvement is incredibly busy, and she has to pick and choose what she does. This means she doesn't have time to do everything she wants to do.
- Years of people in the dental community telling her that the input of dental students and early dentists don't matter has caused an impact to her self-esteem, which leads to self-doubt.
- She lacks a sense of community in dentistry beyond school years.

INDIGO INVOLVEMENT'S COMMUNITIES

- ASDA leadership for dental students
- Social media groups of fellow alumni
- Causes/Personal interests
- Diversity groups (young dentists, women)

HOW INDIGO INVOLVEMENT VIEWS MDA

- She believes in the mission of MDA and that it can provide great opportunities for the dental community.
- She thinks it's geared toward senior dentists, and it doesn't leave much room for younger dentists.
- Because dental school fosters a sense of imposter syndrome, that same complex perpetuates throughout the dental community and MDA.
- She wants to be more involved, but she just can't seem to make time for it. If she had a reason, she would be.

WHAT INDIGO INVOLVEMENT NEEDS

- A reason to put MDA above other commitments
- Tangible results in causes relevant to her and the dental community
- Respect and an ability to create action
- Opportunities that give her responsibility in MDA

TARGET

SAM SUPPORT



It's hard when you're managing a practice, working five days a week, have a family, etc.

Sam Support feels underwater and is in need of help. She strives to hold it together on her own, but when she can't, she reaches out to her friends, family, faith, and colleagues. Sam Support is sensitive to feedback from patients. As a young dentist, she often works more than one job. She's a part-time dentist at multiple clinics to make ends meet and provide her with a sufficient dental salary. She feels she's paying her dues as a young dentist, and knows that she graduated at a rough time during Covid. She's got a bit of a grudge because she feels the dental community wasn't supportive during that time.

WHY SAM SUPPORT JOINS THE MDA

Sam Support joins MDA for the resources above anything else. She tries to use MDA's website, although it can be difficult to find what she wants. She feels the resources MDA has can be lacking and that her mentor can be a better resource for some things. She looks to MDA for job listings, but feels in-depth resources are limited.

Beyond resources, Sam Support looks forward to making connections with other dentists. She thinks it will help her to feel more connected to the dental community and be an emotional wellspring.

SAM SUPPORT'S VALUES

- Integrity
- Reliability
- Caring
- Genuine

MAJOR CHALLENGES

- She lacks a support network that can help her relieve a large part of her stress.
- Sam Support has concerns about her mental health and the mental health of other dentists.
- She doesn't know what the next steps in her career or life should be.

SAM SUPPORT'S COMMUNITIES

- Online social media groups
- Friends and family

HOW SAM SUPPORT VIEWS MDA

- MDA is a potential resources for career information and continuing education
- If she owned her own dental practice, she would likely use MDA's resources more, such as the insurance.

WHAT SAM SUPPORT NEEDS

- Wellness resources that fit her schedule
- Personalized career support services
- Continuing education weekends/extended weekend similar to the University of Michigan ICPSR stats camp

BLAKE BLASÉ



I just don't have a need for MDA.

Blake Blasé isn't too impressed by a state-level dental association, no matter what it did. He's got other things going on, and his job isn't his life. He recharges his batteries and deals with stress through engaging in his hobbies, such as sports. He usually has a partner who also has a high-skilled career, as well as a family background in dentistry. He keeps his life pretty laid-back and chill. When he needs something, he'll figure it out. He's not going to stress about it. He thinks that professional associations are just that, and they don't need to have any kind of support system that would benefit him personally. He wouldn't sign up for it anyway.

WHY BLAKE BLASÉ JOINS THE MDA

He may be a member, but plenty of times Blake Blasé is not a member. When he assesses cost-for-value and determines the cost is higher than the value, he isn't bothered by the prospect of not renewing or becoming a member. Odds are he can get the resources he needs elsewhere, and he's great at finding those resources.

He doesn't have a need for MDA, and the only thing that would make him revisit that decision was if he was ready to open his own practice and wanted to buy insurance through MDA.

BLAKE BLASÉ'S VALUES

- Autonomy
- Faith
- Hard work
- Honesty

MAJOR CHALLENGES

- He generally thinks he should be further ahead in his career than he is, but he also knows he has to pay his dues before he can own a private practice.
- He wishes he could balance his work and family life better, but that's just a product of the modern age.

BLAKE BLASÉ'S COMMUNITIES

- Sports teams
- Group practice
- Religion
- Social media

HOW BLAKE BLASÉ VIEWS MDA

- It's just not worth it.
- MDA doesn't have anything substantive to offer.
- He's aloof to its existence.

WHAT BLAKE BLASÉ NEEDS

- A better work/life balance
- Time to play more sports



Meet the interview participants

The next slide details the interviewed personas: Dental students, MDA members, and non-members.

Who participated in one-on-one interviews?

Dental students (7)

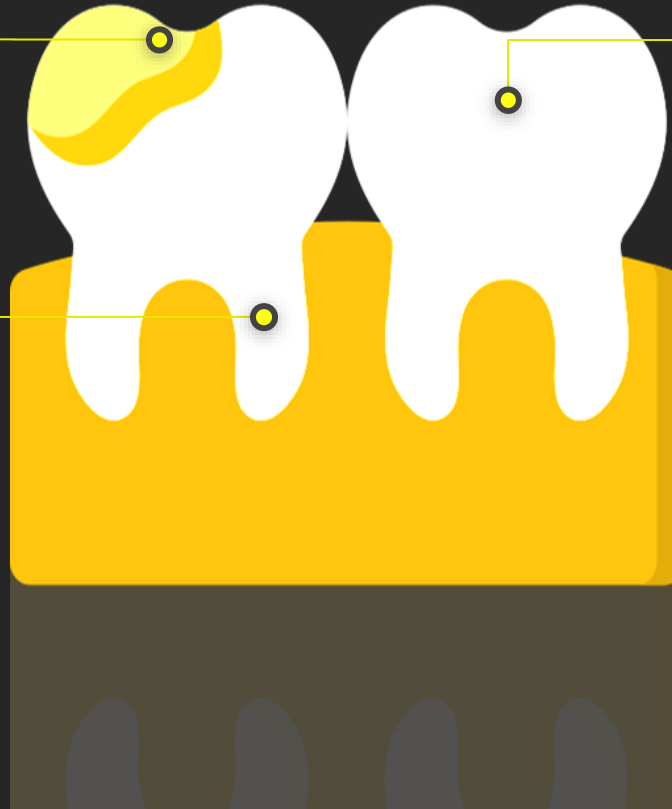
- 5 Female
- 2 Male
- 3 Gen Zs
- 4 Millennials
- 4 White
- 1 Asian
- 1 MENA
- 1 Latinx

MDA members (7)

- 5 Female
- 2 Male
- 7 Millennials
- 3 White
- 2 MENA
- 1 Asian
- 1 Latinx

Non-members (6)

- 6 Men
- 6 Millennials
- 3 Asian
- 2 White
- 1 Latinx



RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1 of 4



Motivators to join / renew MDA

This section details what drives young dentists/dental students join MDA and renew their membership.

Motivators for joining and renewing MDA membership



Obligation as a dentist

The majority of respondents describe signing up out of a sense of duty or obligation. Even if members see no personal benefit, they feel that they are expected to have a membership by the more established dentists in their practice.

Dental schools contribute to this feeling of obligation, encouraging memberships as students so that renewal becomes a habit.



Encouragement from mentors

When dentists are on the fence about paying to renew their membership, they often seek advice from mentors or senior dentists in their practices. Senior colleagues tend to emphasize the importance of networking with other dentists, which MDA facilitates.



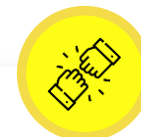
Seeking support as a new dentist

Other members look for a place for professional support, especially as younger dentists often struggle with patients and/or specific clinical cases.



Cultivating a professional network

Cultivating a professional network is a chief motivator for young dentists. MDA supplies access to a large network of dentists. Most young dentists expect MDA to facilitate this process in a bigger way than they do. Many also expect that upon joining, they will take on an active role to expand their network and open new career opportunities. Sadly, most fail to get involved in this way, despite initial high hopes.



Commitment signaling

While most members do not have any idea how MDA supports the larger dental community in Michigan, highly-engaged members renew to signal a personal commitment the wider Michigan-based dental community. These members who are highly engaged do feel an emotional connection to MDA; they perceive their membership as a way to show support to other dentists with a monetary commitment.

Motivators for joining and renewing MDA membership

Did you notice...

Tangible benefits were **not** among the drivers for joining the MDA.
Reasons for joining or renewing were social and emotional:

- Fitting in as a dentist
- Cultivating a network for future career goals
- Imposter syndrome driving outreach for support
- Connection to something bigger

But here's the problem...

When asked to describe MDA, they don't mention any of this. They describe it in a functional, clinical way:

"It's a place for dentists to find insurance."

While this may seem obvious, the straightforward linguistic choices we heard participants use tell us a lot: that although dentists long for an organization that meets their social and emotional needs, they haven't found that in MDA. Therefore, the only way they can describe MDA is by listing a few tactical benefits they remember about the association—to logically justify why they are/were a member.

The lack of description about anything more than well-known benefits suggests a lack of connection on a deeper level with MDA.

Typically insurance was the only benefit remembered without probing. What's fascinating about this is that even though it's the #1 thing people remember about MDA, the insurance doesn't even apply to all dentists as some practices take care of insurance needs for their dentists.



Sandra describes MDA as an association for recent grads and young professionals to help with job search.

(Member)



Jae simply doesn't understand how he benefits from MDA, as it's not a requirement for professional liability insurance.

(Non-Member)

These functional benefits of MDA are in the awareness set of dentists and dental students:

Perceived benefits



Insurance

Whether they used it or not, respondents overwhelmingly brought up insurance as an MDA membership benefit. Typically this is used by owner-dentists.

(while this was the most noted benefit, it was not cited as a motivator to join or renew MDA).



Networking

Michigan dentists - and future dentists - see the benefit of networking with MDA. They know there are events and other opportunities to help them network across the state.



Continuing education

Since everyone needs CE classes, respondents (even non-members) see the benefit of membership around CE classes. However, they also believe major improvements would make this even better (see page x).

The problem with recalling just these 3 benefits...

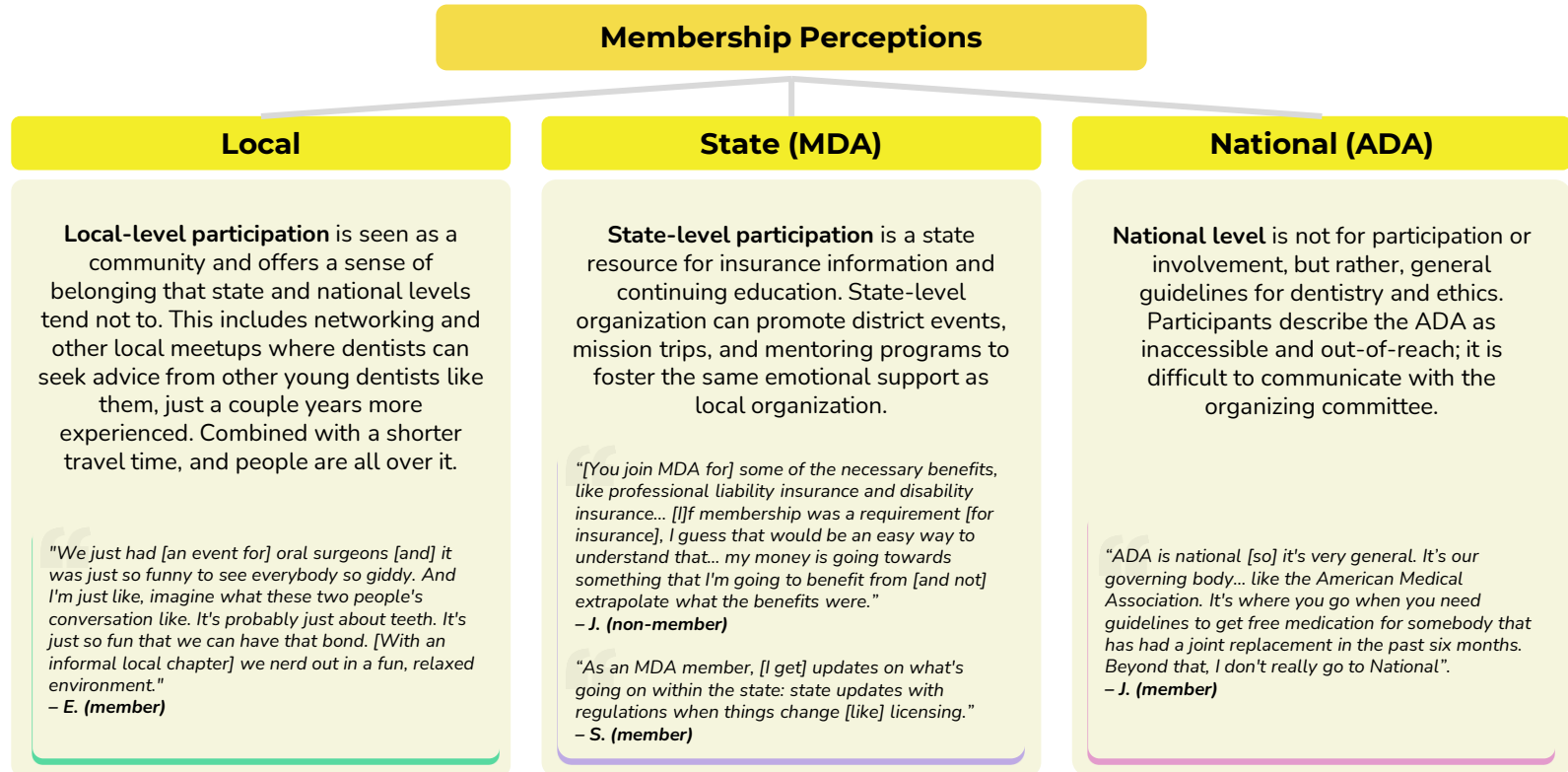


Unaware of the breadth of MDA's offerings: Beyond insurance, a general lack of knowledge exists about the benefits and opportunities available in MDA. Respondents are typically not aware of more than a quarter of MDA's offerings.



Irrelevant to their work/careers: Some respondents - especially younger dentists - see the benefits provided as mainly insurance-based. Since many don't own practices, this is not a benefit for them. They simply do not feel the benefits are relevant to them. Without knowing how MDA can help on an emotional and social level, this insurance-led description won't close the deal.

The tripartite membership structure is understood by participants, but they feel most connected and valued by local chapters.



Key takeaways

People join MDA for social and emotional reasons, which are not currently met.

This may be due to messaging related to tactical benefits, like insurance (several participants told us they get a lot of emails about insurance from MDA).

Participants equate MDA with functional benefits, like insurance and CE credits, but aren't sure what MDA offers beyond these.

Most participants don't know what MDA has to offer and don't know where to look for this information because they're not finding it on the website. They resort to asking friends or mentors, or (rarely) calling the MDA - which is an undesirable action.

MDA provides access to a network, but participants want them to take a more active role in terms of networking.

Some people relate MDA to networking. Although many recognize its importance and would like to join events, most students and young dentists are unsure how to successfully network.



Career challenges and barriers to enrollment

What challenges do dentists/dental students face in their careers, where do they need support, and what is preventing them from renewing MDA membership?

This section illuminates pain points young dentists face so MDA can craft solutions to support them early on in their careers — and build an ongoing relationship in the process.

Distinction worth making: What's stopping enrollment vs. what's stopping involvement

Barriers to enrollment

First and foremost, most young dentists don't feel an emotional connection to MDA.

In the past, obligation and encouragement masked the need for an emotional tie, and pushed MDA to highlight functional membership boons.

However, this strengthened the perception of MDA as a removed, guidance-based organization vs. one in the trenches with dentists, connecting and personalizing experiences and support for them.

Barriers to involvement

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, what's stopping involvement is also a lack of emotional connection.

Dentists rationalize this by citing distance and time (*"it's so hard to find time in the busy schedule"*). However, people will make time for something if they think it's worth it. The problem is MDA has not demonstrated it's worth.

Many activities seem like the same old thing—not the diverse, relevant options dentists are looking for. Value realignment can help.

Additionally, cultural attitudes toward age come into play as respondents cited a stodgy dentistry culture carrying over to MDA. Young dentists fear they may be seen as lacking knowledge and experience for adequate competency.

While MDA may not push this stereotype, many don't feel the organization is actively working to change it – both internally or within the larger dental community. As a suggestion, MDA could create leadership programs targeted to young dentists to inspire and boost involvement.

Young dental professionals struggle with...

Finances: Studying dentistry is expensive, so young graduates start their lives with no money and significant student loan debt.

Employment contracts: Young professionals often feel unsure about new employment contracts.

Job seeking: It's difficult to find a practice - that is a good personal fit - looking for an associate.

Patient interaction: It's stressful to manage a business where people hate coming to see you.

Work-life balance: Young dentists, especially those with a family, struggle to manage workload, maintain CE credits, and find time to spend outside work. They're physically and mentally exhausted - on top of more networking events that don't feel meaningful.

Grief, anger, and imposter syndrome due to the pandemic: Recent graduates feel less prepared due to less time in hands-on programs. They're angry about the lack of experience and grieving the missed opportunity to celebrate their 2020 graduation. The pandemic also enhanced the challenge of finding a job in the first two years after graduation.

What MDA can do to help....

Since young dentist/dental students have no idea how to organize their financial lives, MDA could support with financial planning programming and mentorship.

Young dentists often wish MDA could provide a lawyer or a mentor to help them evaluate employment contracts.

Young dentists don't always find practices they feel aligned with. They already use MDA's job posting mural to look for jobs, but they wished MDA could help finding the perfect match between job-seeking young dentists and practices.

Through mentorships and confidential accountability/coaching groups, young dentists struggle with patient interaction. It would be helpful for them to discuss these feelings in a group setting and get advice.

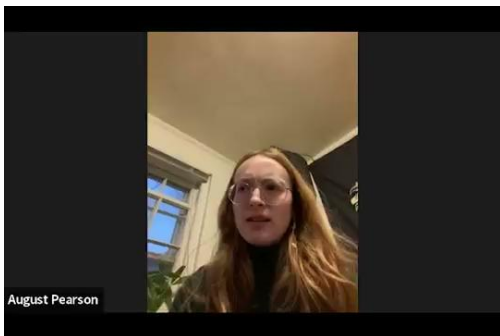
Participants suggested MDA could partner with yoga studios, physiotherapists or therapist to provide special discounts to MDA members so they may take better care of their mental and physical health.

MDA could create district events across the state to promote more intimate social gatherings. Even though participants lack contact, they don't know how to meet new people and would like MDA to facilitate.

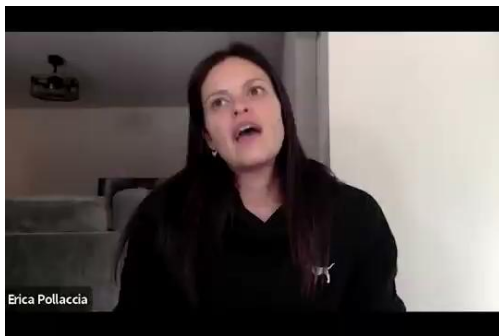


Patient interaction

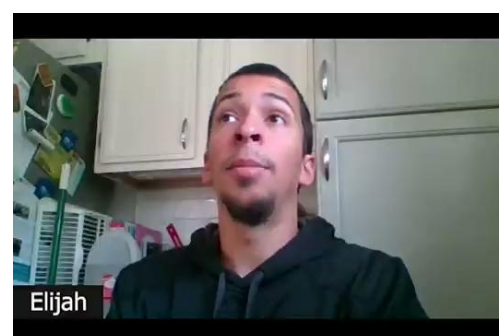
Overwhelmingly, dentists discussed patient interaction as one of the most difficult parts of their day - and a significant contributor to their mental exhaustion. Most participants want to connect with their patients and/or to contribute to their wellbeing, but daily ethical decisions and challenges with patient interaction gets in the way.



Most dentists got into dentistry to **connect with people** – both patients and other dentists. August describes how she aims to form relationships with people from all walks of life, which is a common factor in deciding to practice dentistry.



It's emotionally taxing "putting on a face for eight hours." Erica describes how it's hurtful and stressful to manage a business where **people hate coming to see you** - day after day serving a population who doesn't want to be there and is not grateful for her services.



Elijah describes the **ethical dilemma** he encounters that keeps him up at night - trying to balance serving Medicaid patients with low compensation vs. building revenue for his practice. It's stressful not only seeing the revenue discrepancy for work performed, but also working with the patient population receiving Medicaid.

What MDA can do to create more diverse, relevant offerings

- **More than golf:** Students and young dentists have a different way of relating to each other and forming bonds. Therefore, former social events, such as golf clubs, no longer work and may seem irrelevant.
- **More than entrepreneurial events:** Not every dentist wants to start their own practice, so business and/or entrepreneurial events may seem irrelevant to those who are more interested in hard skills/academic events. Often these participants think the MDA can only support those who want to open a clinic.
- **4 day week:** Most participants would like to work 4 days a week to lead a healthier lifestyle, but do not see how MDA could help them do this.
- **Well-being activities:** Work-life balance and mental health are important issues for this generation. This audience is willing to participate in activities that promote well-being (e.g. yoga classes, stress reduction exercises, etc.)
- **Soft vs. hard skills:** Students and graduates lack access to events that improve soft skills (e.g. leadership, management, assessment of employment opportunities). Experienced dentists, on the other hand, tend to prefer events that improve their hard skills, as they feel the need to keep up with new technologies and best practices.
- **New event types:** The MDA needs to offer different events targeted to different member groups to attract and retain the younger generation. *These could be volunteering activities, mission trips, thematic events to discuss diversity, or hands-on activities to learn new hard skills.*

Dentists focus on lack of time in describing their barriers - but we believe there's more to this.

- **Busy schedules:** One of the biggest complaints is that participants do not have enough time to attend MDA activities and/or social events due to busy schedules.
- **Distance:** Respondents browse through emails to see if something is happening near them. If it's easy to get to, they may attend. But, if they have to commute a long distance, they won't go.
- **Introverts:** Others do not think they have the social skills to join an organization as they are introverted and uncomfortable socializing. They expect the MDA to create events with a different purpose (not necessarily related to networking) they can participate in such as missions or events related to values such as honesty, integrity, and ethics).
- **Lack of time or lack of value perception in MDA:** While some respondents are already involved in committees and other organizations, they do not have the time to be actively involved in another. This means MDA must be attractive enough to become a priority.



Currently, Sandra's company pays for her MDA membership, but if she had to pay it herself she wouldn't see it being worthwhile.

A tale of two student experiences

Student interaction with Michigan Dental Association

Erica feels her MDA experiences were marginalizing as dental students weren't taken seriously during her time on the committee. She wants to participate more, but it's difficult to find the time and motivation.

Student interaction with California Dental Association

Yousif was active in the CDA. He describes the CDA as an organization that advocated for students and dentists effectively - and included students in prestigious positions. He felt valued in the CDA, which is why he wanted to be active in the MDA. He hasn't been able to make the time to get involved.



Key takeaways

Understanding barriers will help you develop the right opportunities and messaging.



Barriers to enrollment vs. involvement are different.

Actions to lessen these barriers revolve around establishing a more powerful emotional tie between MDA and dentists.



People like Indigo Involvement want to be heavily involved.

These are great assets for recruitment efforts, but you need more diverse offerings to attract individuals.



Lack of time is just an excuse.

People will make time with the right emotional connection.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 3 of 4



Value alignment between young dentists/dental students and MDA

This section outlines the perceived brand value of MDA and the alignment of personal values with MDA's values.

What are the core values of Michigan dentists?

evidence being inclusive safety connection
communication integrity empathy being genuine
respect constant improvement truthful humbleness
joy being understanding honesty autonomy science
doing the right thing even when people are not looking constant improvement
trust family hard working faith listening to science and evidence
being kind traveling compassionate ethic knowledge caring



Value alignment

Value alignment between an organization and its members is essential for active involvement.

- Honesty is the most important value to members and non-members.
- Followed by respect, care, integrity and family.
- Since taking good care of patients and being honest is one of the most important things to participants, they expect MDA to help achieve these goals.

It's difficult for some to think about the values MDA has.

Lack of meaning

Likely a product of the functional nature of the organization, it's tough for some respondents to come up with words to describe the organization. Again, this points to a lack of a personal relationship between the organization and its members.

Transactional relationship

Respondents list actions of the MDA (e.g. “provides insurance”, “provides CE credits”, “promotes social events”, “sends emails”) when discussing its values and value alignment.

Members were not able to provide context and imagery of MDA values. Short examples cited during the interviews were largely devoid of emotional drivers and establish the transactional link between dentists and the MDA.



"The values MDA has with regard to bettering oral health and improving access to care, and helping underserved communities align with my own values, in a big way. It's something that I'm super passionate about." – August (student)

Respondents project MDA has good values due its actions.

Differences in having “good values” and value alignment

Some respondents project the good in the values of the MDA as they are not sure about the organization’s true value alignment. The policies of the ADA or the organization determine the *goodness* of MDA values,, missing the mark on alignment.

Differences exist in personal/professional values and the values of MDA

Respondents reflected on core values, such as faith, family, and integrity, for personal and professional values. They may agree that their values align, but cite mainly transactional values for MDA such as insurance and educational support.



Justin Chan

Sense of belonging

Networking and community building cannot be the main goal of an event, rather the result of various forms of coming together. In most cases, community is where home is. Moreover, dentists may find it difficult to attend social events where the main purpose is to network. Some prefer more relaxed, inclusive activities that provide space for informal conversations.

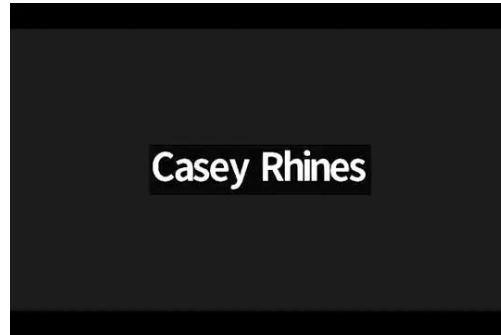
- **A connection with Michigan:** Some members tend to stay in MDA because Michigan is where they've spent their whole lives and they intend to stay in the state.
- **Out of Michigan, out of MDA:** Often students do not renew their membership because they plan to move back to their home states. Some former members have cancelled their membership because they've moved to another state for work or further study.
- **Expensive fee:** Some members don't want to miss out on a connection with fellow colleagues, but find the MDA fee expensive for what it is offered.
- **MDA's district events:** They would like for MDA to organize local district gatherings among dentists to could connect with local communities.
- **Old-fashion social gathering are unattractive:** Most participants are willing to create and participate in various communities in and outside dentistry, but find it difficult to identify with MDA community activities such as golf clubs.
- **Volunteer through MDA:** Some participants suggest volunteer activities like mission trips or building something for low-income people to create connections with other members.

How participants feel about networking events



Di wishes there were more activities that create a comfortable space for conversations to flow.

(Student)



Casey shares with us the recognition of a community in the MDA, but she is not sure if people know who she is in the organization.

(Member)



Elijah tells us he never felt comfortable going to MDA's social events.

(Non-Member)

Build a sense of community for Gen Z

The team at Bixa Research has seen organizations that effectively harness Gen Z to create a community and ones that have not been as effective. The idea of community is absolutely essential to the Gen Z psyche. We've analyzed what works and what doesn't to develop an eight-step approach to building a genuine Gen Z community. We've given you the steps for here for no additional cost. Armed with the new insights into your audiences, you'll want to brainstorm with your team how to apply these steps to MDA in the best way.

1

Connect over common experiences held by the group of Gen Zs you want to target.

2

Create an in-group and an out-group.

3

Integrate Gen Z's input in you organization in tangible ways - give them a voice.

5

Personalize everything.

4

Establish a sense of pride in those who belong to the community.

6

Foster open communication, especially online.

7

Create fun and interactive experiences.

8

Embrace and be transparent about the rollercoaster of emotions.



Diversity and representation

Young dentists and dental students recognize the dental industry has changed. They see there are more women, more MENA, and more Hispanic/Latinx populations joining dental school. However, when it comes to leadership positions, they still see a lot of white men at the top.

An industry is progress of change

"When it comes to the different cultures interactions, I really do feel like we have a good mix, but I feel like when it comes to like the leadership roles, I do feel like it's more male represented." – E. (MDA member)

"In my practice, every day I will get mistaken for a hygienist or an assistant at least like two or three times a day. It asks, Oh, you look like you haven't graduated high school. I'm just like, I promised I have a degree. So, oral Surgery as a practice is a disaster as far as like inclusive that inclusion and diversity is horrendous." – J. (MDA member)

"There are moments in dental school and in dentistry, where I feel out of place because I don't come from a family of dentists. And I didn't grow up with a lot of money. And sometimes it feels like dentistry is a very wealthy people with dentist or physician parents. And so it feels a little bit exclusionary sometimes." – A. (Student)

- **Diversity increase:** When it comes to dental school and/or general practice, it has become more diverse in terms of gender (most assume a 50-50 ratio of women to men in dentistry).
- **Still a long way to go:** Even though it has become more diverse in terms of race, non-white people are still in the minority.
- **Leadership positions are not diverse enough:** In leadership positions, they are generally underrepresented in dentistry in general as people tend to see white men at the top.
- **Underrepresentation in specialties:** The same underrepresentation occurs when it comes to different specialties. Oral Surgery, for example, it is still highly male dominated.
- **Underrepresentation at MDA:** participants see the same level of diversity among members, but wish they could see different and more diverse people in MDA leadership positions.

Cost for value

The cost of membership is not worth it for the majority of respondents, as most do not know what MDA offers. When asked what benefits they would like to see from MDA, they are not sure how much the MDA can do or offer. Even those who decide to renew their membership do not feel they are receiving benefits from their membership that are commensurate with the cost.



Deciding factor for non-members

Anass, who works in Ohio and in Michigan, never joined MDA because he is not sure how its benefits differ from those of the American Association of Orthodontics, where he already gets his insurance.



Dentists can get resources elsewhere

Keale, former member of the MDA, tells us he learned it was not necessary to be an MDA member to get malpractice insurance.

"The only difference is that instead of getting the MDA prorated membership rate, you just have to pay a little bit more"



Former members don't think the cost is worth it

Justin doesn't think MDA is worth the money because he does not know what else MDA can offer. This is why he didn't renew his membership for the second year.

Key takeaways

A near-clinical relationship exists between MDA and members. Members do not feel an emotional connection to MDA, and are more likely to connect with an organization that reflects their diversity and values and builds community in more informal ways where people can connect without awkward small talk.

Honesty is the most commonly named value held by young dentists.

This coincides with research on these age groups who value a genuine and connected experience.

Most dentists/dental students do not have an emotional connection to MDA.

It's difficult for respondents to associate MDA in non-functional ways because they don't know what else they can do to engage with the organization. MDA needs to expand its communication strategy to attract and engage new members.

Community requires time and connection

Overall, there is a lack of sense of community and people find it awkward to go to MDA social events - either because they don't know who is attending or because other participants don't know who they are. They would like to go to MDA events with specific volunteering activities that allow for informal conversations.

Current dental students and recent graduates see a diverse world around them, but not in MDA leadership.

They want to see more diversity in MDA leadership and have leadership opportunities themselves. Currently they don't see leadership as an option unless they are long-time members.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 4 of 4



MDA in action

What actions can MDA take to increase enrollment and involvement of young dentists?

The 4 Pillars of MDA Membership



Professional growth

- Employment contract advice
- Curated list of CE credits
- Personalized CE plans for young dentists
- Hands-on CE credits to enhance hard skills and help with feelings of lack of experience or imposter syndrome
- Discounted CE courses for members



Personal growth

- Programming related to mental health and work-life balance
- Physical symptom relief for dentists (posture, yoga, PT, etc.)
- Financial planning for young dentists



Authentic relationships

- One-on-one mentoring from someone who is still young (just a few years ahead)
- Assigned accountability and/or coaching groups that meet once a month and change 3 times a year
- Add more diverse and relevant offerings tailored for young dentists (please, no golf!)
- Group memberships by practice



Social action

- Volunteer opportunities for low-income patients
- Dentistry mission trips

Pillar I: Professional growth

Advice on employment contracts

Young dentists would appreciate employment contract advice from either a lawyer or an experienced dentist so they don't feel like they're getting taken advantage of. Regular employment contract workshops would be a great benefit.

Matchmaker services between member dentists and good-fit practices looking to hire

Young dentists don't always find practices they feel aligned with. They already use MDA's job posting mural to look for jobs, but they wish MDA could help with more personalized services to find the perfect match between job-seeking young dentists and practices.

Hands-on CE credits to enhance hard skills

Current CE credits offered by MDA are seen as boring and obvious. Young dentists want to learn more innovative techniques and hands-on activities.

CE credit tracker

Help dentists track their minimum requirements for CE credits each year through an online portal, creating a "Must Do" list.

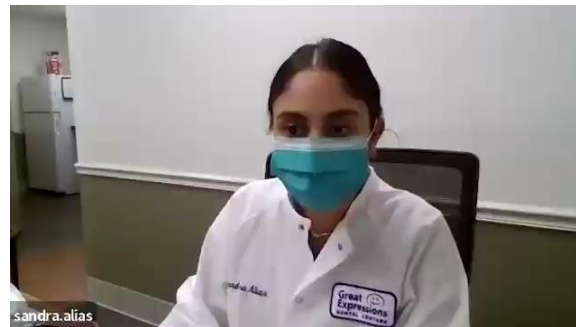
Personalized CE plans for young dentists

Young dentists expect personalization. Creating career plans unique to each individual based on their specialty as well as entrepreneurship/leadership ambition would be ideal.

Discounted CE courses

Offer CE courses at a lower price for members.

List all CE options and give it to us because we're supporting you giving you the membership fee. Can you support us and educate us to make sure that at least we get the minimum requirements for CE credits so that we can stay on top of that? – E. (Member)



Sandra tells us why she would like more hands-on CE credits.



Personalized career options: Participants would like the MDA to help them develop both soft skills AND hard skills. They also want the MDA to take into account that not every dentist wants to start their own practice. How can the MDA support participants in terms of career options? Mentoring seems like a perfect solution to highlight the myriad of paths a young dentist can take.

Pillar II: Personal growth

Stress relief for mental health

Today's young professionals (dentists included) are experiencing abnormally high stress levels. They are looking for personalized dental programs that take into account unique stressors, such as how to deal with patients who hate being at the dentist. MDA programming might include discussion groups, best practice webinars, and panels.

Financial planning

Recent graduates are commonly lost and overwhelmed organizing their financial lives. Financial planning guidance would be a boon to young dentists.

Stress relief for physical symptoms

The physical demands of being a dentist are often not understood by students until they start working. Tension is caused by hunching over all day, and any relief would help ease stress in young dentists - and let them know that MDA cares for them and wants to see them succeed.

Posture and balance workshops, talks from physical therapists, chiropractic adjustments, or fitness passes and discounted memberships could be a game changer for young dentists dealing with physical manifestations of stress for the first time.



Erica discusses wellness options that would resonate with her. Young dentists are highly attuned to their work-life balance. This means they worry about their mental and physical health. MDA could partner with gyms, therapists, and other wellness offerings to offer free passes, discounted group rates, etc.



Most participants had no idea how to deal with student loans and/or personal finances. They don't even know who to ask. MDA could offer special events and consultations with financial advisors and/or attorneys.

Pillar III: Authentic relationships

Mentor program

One-on-one mentoring from someone who is just a few years ahead

Accountability or coaching groups

Assigned accountability and/or coaching groups that meet once a month and change 3 times a year: Young dentists tend to seek mentorship among coworkers, MDA members, and on social media (Facebook, Instagram). Consider facilitated accountability groups that meet once a month to share confidential struggles and support/

Affinity group meetings

As MDA strives to cultivate an environment in which all members of the community feel valued and affirmed, affinity group meetings are a way to bring people together who share a common identity or experience. Here they can engage in thoughtful dialogue, provide support, affirm identity, and share openly in a safe space.

These groups support student and young dentist development by fostering self-awareness, confidence, and more authentic, healthy relationships within the community. Examples may include affinity groups for Women in Dentistry or Latinx in Dentistry as underrepresented groups.

Add more diverse, relevant offerings

This means offerings and events tailored for young dentists (please, no golf!)

Group memberships by practice

Potential members in group practices constantly weigh cost vs. value.

Group memberships would eliminate individuals having to decide if it is worth the cost. Embrace the communal idea of membership by providing whole-practice memberships. MDA can tie this membership as a requirement for the insurance discount. Offer exclusives for practices who buy the group membership.



Maria shares with us her experience in working with affinity groups within dentistry. (Student)



Faith wishes MDA gatherings and events were more exciting. (Student)

Pillar IV: Social action

Volunteer opportunities to help low-income patients

Participants want to help low-income people, but they need support to expand services. Could MDA offer some sort of reimbursement grant for aiding Medicaid and other low-income patients or some advocacy from MDA (more advocacy organization vs. commercial organization) as MDA is perceived as overly commercial?

Dentistry mission trips

Some participants said they would like to join missions to help low-income families. Others suggested shorter trips to help local low-income groups.

Bonding experiences (whole weekend) that are authentic were also suggested.

Social action is not legislation

Young dentists are interested in community, helping others, and supporting other dentists. They don't see a connection between this type of social action and legislative actions. Especially for students, a focus on legislation turns them off rather than pulls them in. Social action for young dentists is more about community, and less about politics.



Participants discussed MDA as commercial in nature, with “red flags” that occurred with specific commercial partnerships. Overall, they are looking for MDA to do more in the realm of advocacy, and less commercialization and advertisement. They also do not appreciate the focus on politics. They want MDA to be a logo they can be proud of, as people and as dentists.

Telling your story online

Respondents did not connect with the website or social media. They found the website to be cumbersome and unattractive, lacking in intuitive organization and modern design. It's simply not a resource they often use—not because they don't want to, but because it's not giving them what they need.

Similarly, while they often participate in dental groups (including those just for Michiganders), they do not engage with MDA on social media. Many were not aware if MDA even had social accounts.

The other issue is where they are getting their messages. Email seems like a robust strategy for MDA, only if the messaging is less “commercial” and feels more like an authentic, modern community with values participants want to see in a membership organization.

What MDA can do:

- Conduct Storybrand workshops to align internally on how you will constantly tell the story of your brand, across media. (we can facilitate these with you, if you'd like)
- Rebrand with the new pillars of professional growth, personal growth, authentic relationships, and social action (which for young dentists is more about community, and less about legislation)
- Redesign MDA's website to reflect a strong community that is authentically beneficial to dentists - not just something that you're expected to join.
- Enhance your social media presence by posting on Instagram and YouTube regularly and by engaging with other dentists. Add content that tells your story in a consistent way and contributes to the four pillars.

Key messages for MDA to communicate

Interview participants weren't sure about benefits - aside from insurance - involved in an MDA membership. Here are a few shortlisted messages that will help attract and engage young generations of dentists:

- Clear, concise list of benefits that come with their membership
- Featured dentist stories to showcase new faces in the field
- Larger state events and joint events between multiple local chapters
- Equal communication dedicated to each of the 4 pillars
- Webinars and virtual events
- Michigan legislations to get involved with
- Academic research - top innovations in different specialty groups



Communicate where you stand on hot-button issues

A consistent issue across personas was the high degree of what dentists consider “hate” spewing at them from their patients. Dental anxiety is real for many patients, but few think about the impacts of that anxiety on their dentists. Dentists spoke about two issues: feeling unwelcome by patients; and feeling like they can’t do difficult procedures because they fear lawsuits. MDA members don’t feel the organization does anything to support them in this area.

Another hot-button item was cited by participants when talking about California Dental Association’s ability to create “real change” by holding Delta Dental to account. They lamented that MDA could do the same kind of work. However, when discussing legislative or political interests, aside from this singular issue, they were wholly uninterested.

Embark on a communications strategy to show dentists the empathetic side of MDA: that you are not just a corporate entity, but rather an understanding community that values them as individuals.

- Run YouTube ads addressing both patient dental anxiety and the anxiety that dentists face.
- Make mental health for dentists in Michigan a public advocacy focus.
- Focus legislative energy on just 1 issue at a time, not a wide range of issues, to ensure that dentists fully understand the issues and that MDA backs their interests.

These strategies will help to foster open communication among members, develop a sense of pride in MDA, and expose and address common problems facing young dentists.



Focus Group Findings

After the interviews, Bixa conducted focus groups with:

- Member dentists
- Non-member dentists
- Dental students currently enrolled in one of the two Michigan dental schools

Who participated in the focus groups?

Dental students (7)

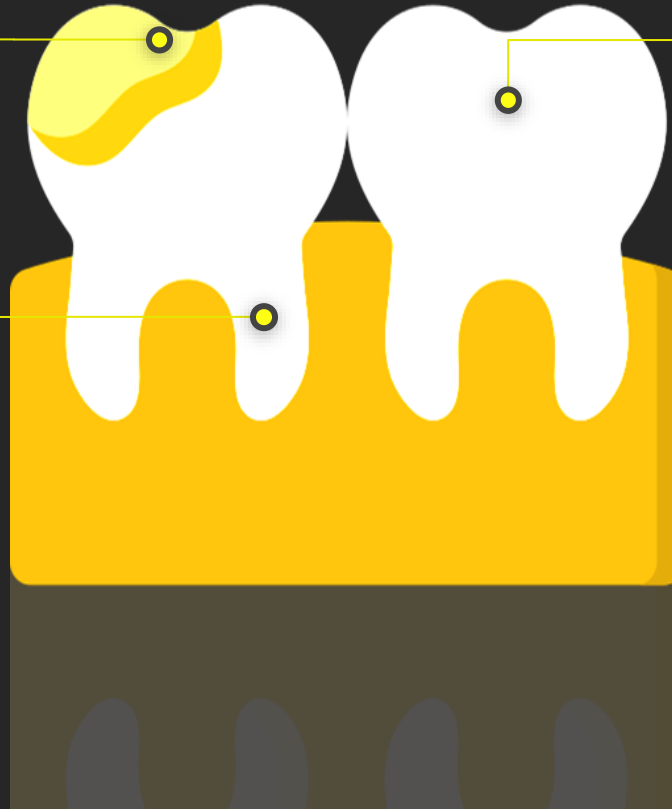
- 4 Female
- 3 Male
- 3 Gen Zs
- 4 Millennials
- 5 White
- 1 Asian
- 1 MENA

MDA members (6)

- 3 Female
- 3 Male
- 6 Millennials
- 4 White
- 1 Asian
- 1 Latinx

Non-members (5)

- 3 Female
- 2 Male
- 5 Millennials
- 2 Asian
- 2 White
- 1 MENA



Insights from focus groups fell into a few key categories



Expected baseline benefits for cost of membership

A few items were not considered benefits, but baseline offerings expected for the money they pay. These included insurance, discounts on CE courses.



The right kind of networking for young dentists

During focus groups, specific types of networking events stood out as being more helpful than others: mainly those that connected on a more long-term, genuine way, including study clubs, facilitate, group mentoring, and service opportunities.



Events that feel less awkward

Digital natives don't always have practiced social skills needed to meet someone and immediately connect with them. They describe typical networking events as forced and awkward, even if they are for the betterment of their career. Meeting new people seems easier in a less formal setting.



Concept testing results + new ideas

We discussed concepts both conceived by the MDA, as well as those that came out of the interviews. This section discusses the results and insights that came out of each concept tested with participants.

Expected baseline offerings: not considered benefits

Group rates on insurance

Group discounts on malpractice insurance was the fundamental thing people were paying for. This was not considered a benefit, but rather, the service that people simply expected for their membership dues. This was the bare minimum and something that does not have to be advertised. The more it's advertised, the more young dentists perceive MDA as being “too commercial”.

Discounts on CE courses

It was expected that as a member of the MDA, people would get discounts on CE courses. Some young dentists interpreted the discounts as baseline, however, assuming that the higher rates were more of a penalty for not being a part of the MDA, instead of the discounted rates being a benefit. Advertising discounted rates are only helpful if it comes with a robust lineup of CE courses, filtered by topic and location, and available immediately with a calendar-based signup on an app.

Usually you join because as a first year out you get a complimentary membership and then you get the discount on CE courses. And I'd say the biggest thing was the CE courses, but then also... malpractice policy [at a] prorated amount.

- Non-member

The courses are what I find most [compelling]. I'm not an MDA member. But I am a [2020] grad And the first year, I think it was discounted, or it was free. But I didn't renew... because I didn't feel like it was worth it to me... looking at the stuff that they offered didn't add up to me... even with the CE courses.

- Non-member

I know that money has to come from somewhere, but it seems like [they're always trying to get us to buy a product and] a lot of those products are very much geared at overt advertising. [In emails and physical mail] there's a lot of 'here, buy this product, try this service,... partnership with the DSOs, things like that. So it was... very commercial, whether or not that aligns with the overall goals of the MDA.

- Non-member

Professional networking for young dentists means fostering genuine, local connections

Because they went to dental school in Michigan, young dentists already consider themselves a part of the dental community. Universities do a good job welcoming them to the community, and providing them ample opportunities to begin their networking journey. That means that once they graduate, they aren't simply looking for a network of dentists to join; they already have that. What they need more than a "network" alone is specific types of professional events that will create long-lasting, genuine relationships—as well as a referral network of specialists they personally know and trust to refer their patients to.

What professional networking events would feel like a benefit?

Study clubs, Group mentoring, Service opportunities, 1-2 day social events

What's common about these events?

- Long-term relationships through meeting routinely over time with the same group
- Genuine connection vs. surface-level conversations
- In-person meetings supplemented by quick online chats
- Connecting with local dentists is key—can't be too far of a referral for patients
- Connecting with a variety of specialists is needed

I already feel connected to the dental community by virtue of just being in [dental school in Michigan]. So [being a member of MDA] was no net gain in my experience.

- Non-member

I've found University of Michigan alumni... to be a good resource. I reached out to an oral surgeon who I knew before I graduated... with this difficult extraction that I could not get the tooth out. And I called him up, and I was like, 'Hey, do you remember me, I was a student of yours at U of M'... And he said, call the patient in here, I don't care that they have Medicaid, I don't care about the finances, let's get them in, let's get the tooth out. And he bailed me out... [He was not] within my professional organization. But... having that network of doctors [no matter where it's from] is so important because as a dental professional, you don't want to feel like the other dentists are competing with you. You want to feel like we're all a team, you know?

- Non-member

Study Clubs

Every single dentist in our focus groups (member or non-member) was actively looking for a “study club” in their local area to join. Not only that, every one of them was struggling to find one that worked for them geographically.

Organizing in-person study groups that meet on a monthly basis with only one person from each specialty in each group in each would be a major benefit to young dentists, one they would even consider paying more for. In addition to talking through compelling cases to learn from other dentists/specialties, this gives young dentists an opportunity to grow their referral base so they can feel confident in specialist referrals for their clients.

While mentors who are older are respected, meeting with other dentists close to their age was important for this group of young dentists.



I've actually been trying to find a study club. Close to like, where I live where, you know, I could go to and talk and network and, you know, get advice about certain cases and stuff like that. But I haven't found anything yet. But definitely something that I'd be interested in.

- Non-member

I'm like someone who likes to hear from peers because I don't really like outdated methods. And, you know, so that's also important. I always want to know what's the new and upcoming thing [because] I always want to make sure I'm staying current with everything.

- Member dentist

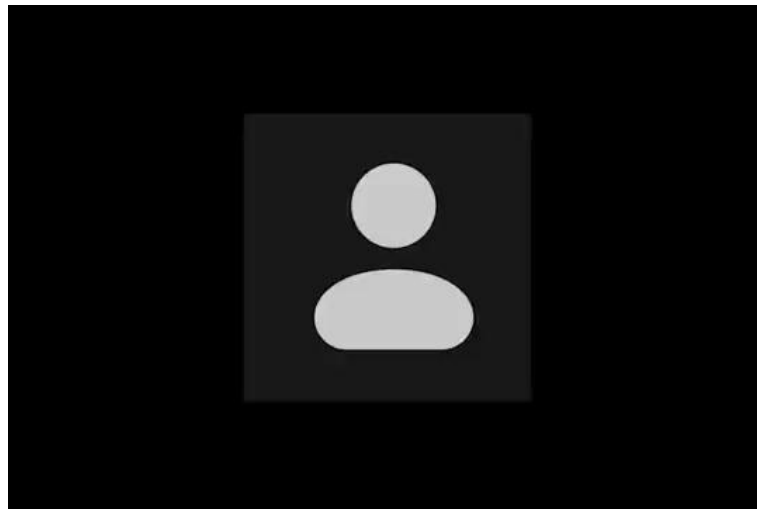
Small Group Mentoring

Mentorship is a crucial piece for young dentists, many of whom are not totally confident in their skills as they are taking to their profession out of dental school.

Young dentists are craving the connection and support that comes from in-person mentorship. However, these digital natives don't consistently have the social skills developed to facilitate this type of relationship in an informal way. Finding a mentor is tricky and awkward in a one-on-one setting. Oftentimes, young dentists say they don't know what to ask - they prefer to listen then react to what's being said. A group coaching setting may be more beneficial for these types of dentists, with each small group facilitated by a more experienced dentist. This model is one that Entrepreneurship Organization (EO) has adopted for its EO Accelerator program with less experienced entrepreneurs.

For more experienced dentists looking to hire new partners or sell a practice, this could be a good way for them to meet younger faces and genuinely interact with them before even thinking about a business arrangement.

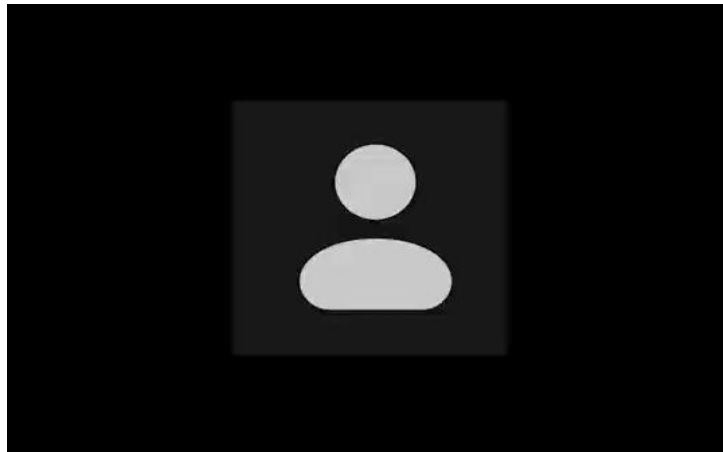
We ran the idea of "speed networking" by the focus groups and they did not like this concept at all because it seemed intimidating and impersonal.



Service Opportunities

Dentists want to do good and network at the same time. One participant shares her experience with service opportunities through the North Carolina Dental Association, prior to moving to Michigan.

Only one dentist out of all participants in the focus groups was excited about legislative events—she had even gone with MDA on a tip to Legislative Day in DC. Despite this one dentist's enthusiasm, however, legislative issues that MDA focuses on tend to feel too far removed from what is top of mind for dental students and young dentists.



Honestly, I just can't be bothered with legislation and things like that right now. In the future, probably, but for right now, as a dental student, it's too much.

- Dental Student

I'm a part of ASDA, so I get the same legislation propositions three different times. I would prefer something that's more tailored to the state itself. It just seems like it's a lot of like, clutter, or maybe there's just not that much stuff going on in Michigan, so they have to fill in the gaps with other things... But I don't think we need a monthly newsletter.

- Dental Student

Dinner & Learns

Several member dentists mentioned “dinner & learn” events as one of the most valuable formats because it mixes social and professional. Young dentists and dental students enjoy hearing both from dentists and also other specialists, legal experts, mental health experts, and other topic-based experts. They also very much want to hear from vendors to learn what’s out there in the field.

However, these events are often perceived as awkward. They believe the only way to facilitate authentic connections is to go to every event and meet the same people over and over—this turns into a very time-consuming, overwhelming strategy for early career dentists.

One easy thing MDA could do is to flip the sequence of how the event is run: instead of networking first then eating while you learn, flip the order: the event starts when you arrive, then during the meal, while you eat you get to discuss with your table what you thought of the talk. Young dentists are more comfortable participating in a conversation when there’s a prompt or something to react to, to start the conversation.



A huge benefit that I found [from my local chapter] is they'll have lunch and learns or happy hours [to] put you in front of local vendors. I was born and raised in Michigan and plan on practicing in Michigan. So it's nice to get exposure to those local vendors and kind of start, you know, not even necessarily building relationships, but just like becoming familiar with the process and how it works and the different companies, so that when I eventually graduate and move on, I already have a lot of these company names in the back of my mind... This is a good thing for me that I found.

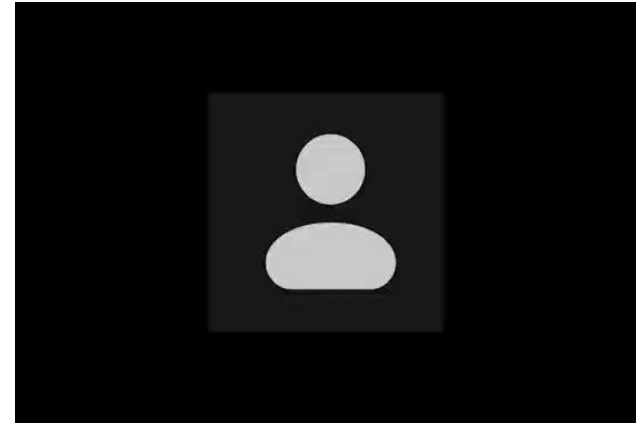
- Dental student

Events are awkward...

Digital natives don't always have practiced social skills needed to meet someone and immediately connect with them. They describe typical networking events as forced and awkward, even if they are for the betterment of their career. Meeting new people seems easier in a less formal setting.

Recommendations for less awkward events:

- In a typical CE events, there's a social event as people come in, then you learn while eating. The order of the event should be flipped, so that the event starts promptly when you arrive, then during dinner you get to discuss with your table what you thought of the event. Young dentists are more comfortable participating in a conversation when there's a prompt.
- Open bar: One participant said, "I don't mean to be clever, but it definitely makes it a lot nicer and easier to interact with people."
- Day trips, service events, or other types of events where you get to know people by doing (and experiencing) an activity together. That way you have something to talk about as well as a shared experience to recall at a later time when you connect with that person again.



Concept: Dental Destination

Online community just for Michigan early career dentists to post questions, share information, post links, comment, etc. Content could be a mix of clinical, practice management, career, and work/life topics.

What did they think of this concept?

Helpful, only if implemented in the right way. Even before asking about this concept, participants were bringing up online groups on platforms such as Whatsapp and Slack. The quote to the right is from a young dentist who moved to Michigan after practicing in Florida. She recalls in informal Whatsapp group that was helpful for her local community in Florida. If it's implemented in the right way - on a platform where dentists are already on; informal in nature; for dentists to talk with other dentists; NOT just for young dentists.

Where would they like to see this implemented?

Facebook and Whatsapp were the most popular requests. Other requests were for Slack or GroupMe. It was clear that a standalone community or a LinkedIn group would be a no-go. Our suggestion would be for a Facebook group with clear rules, pinned posts, and moderation.

Should it connect to the MDA app?

No, the point would be to facilitate an informal group that's not under an MDA wing. Also, people don't check the MDA app daily. They do check Facebook and Whatsapp daily.

Who should be allowed to participate?

Any dentists, regardless of age / experience. Many times, young dentists are looking for advice from more experienced dentists and if that's not available, there's no point to this online community.

Ok if the MDA posts info there?

No, the rules would need to be clear that only real humans post. So if someone personally wants to posts occasionally to talk about upcoming MDA events, that would be ok, but not the MDA as an entity.

I moved from Florida [where my local] organization [had] a WhatsApp group [where] other doctors are sharing their cases and whatnot, or they try to get meetings every now and then to meet like mini-cons. So I just thought that was very different way of networking, that I haven't seen... in other places, so I thought that was pretty cool [especially for] networking [and] job opportunities.

- Non-member

Concept: Interactive Journal

We facilitated a discussion in each of the focus groups about the MDA journal. We asked participants to tell us about their experience with the journal, what formats would be most valuable to receive this type of content in, if interactive content (e.g., more video) would be appropriate.

What did they think of the journal?

Young dentists love the journal, as is. They love that it's printed. They notice it because it's snail mail. They love sitting down and reading it with a highlighter.

Is it better in more interactive formats?

No, it's a rare thing to get a real journal in the mail, and young dentists appreciate its physical heft and relevancy. They like to be able to hold it in their hands. The only interactive format that would be helpful is events (including livestreams or webinars) with a discussion about the research - genuine conversations between dentists about new findings / insights.

“

I think probably the content that was most helpful and appreciated [when I was a member] was actually in some of the hard copy—not email—snail mail publications [with] actual case reports and studies that were relevant to what we were doing every other day on any day on a clinical basis. So having that kind of primary literature was something that was very important.

- Non-member

Concept: Five-Minute Mentor

This is a series of videos 5 minutes in length that would be available through the MDA app, on the MDA website, and through social media. Each video will address one topic. The video “mentors” would be a variety of people including MDA dentists, continuing education speakers / experts, MDA or ADA staff, lawyers, accountants, etc.

What did they think of this concept?

While some were ambivalent about this concept, a few thought it was redundant to what’s on YouTube currently. MDA could add these as a playlist on YouTube, but this would likely not differentiate MDA from the mass of similar videos on YouTube, or be seen as a benefit to joining MDA. We recommend not moving forward this idea, unless they are used in conjunction with an in-person event to facilitate conversation.

Who do they want to hear from?

Not just dentists - a variety of specialists, especially legal subject matter experts or other topic-based experts. Young dentist are keen on soaking in knowledge from any dentist, dental expert, or even vendors to learn what’s out there in the field.

What do they think of the five-minute format?

These videos would be great to incorporate into networking events - watch a video then speak to someone about it as a way to facilitate a conversation and give young dentists something to talk about.



“That sounds like really impersonal... You could probably just YouTube a five-minute video if you want.

- Member dentist

Concept: CE Jumpstart

This is a CE opportunity to address the continuing education that new grads want most at no cost, thus increasing the value of membership while helping them excel. There are three ways we could do this. Do they like this, which would be most attractive?

- *Schedule a special program of free CE for new dentists (in person or online?), content to be determined by most popular new dentist CE.*
- *Provide a \$100 CE voucher that dentists can use for any MDA CE program (live via Seminar Series, MDA Annual Session, or webinar, or on-demand virtual programs)*
- *Provide a voucher good for 1 full day program or 2 half-day programs of their choice.*

What did they think of this concept?

No one would ever pass up a free CE credit, and for those who really calculate the dollar amount for the ROI on their membership fee, this could be a tipping point.

Less options may be better.

Sure, people say they'd like a voucher. But have you ever been to one of those stores that sells 25+ types of olive oil? They always go out of business because people have trouble choosing between so many options. A free CE credit on a selected (or better yet, voted on) topic is easiest.

Are hands-on CE credits better?

Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. because they cost more.

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I personally don't like having too many options. So I think I would probably go with the free CE event for new grads where they would just be like, 'Okay, here you guys go. These are your three options...' Which one would you like? I think that would be best for me. But again, like I think everyone's different.

- Non-member

Concept: Affinity Groups

As MDA strives to cultivate an environment in which all members of the community feel valued and affirmed, affinity group meetings are a way to bring people together who share a common identity or experience. Here they can engage in thoughtful dialogue, provide support, affirm identity, and share openly in a safe space. These groups support student and young dentist development by fostering self-awareness, confidence, and more authentic, healthy relationships within the community. Examples may include affinity groups for Women in Dentistry or Latinx in Dentistry as underrepresented groups.

What did they think of affinity groups?

Women and minorities appreciated the idea for affinity groups, and also appreciated the diversity of specialty in study clubs. A number of participants appreciated the idea of a Young Dental Professionals group, but also wanted to make sure they still had opportunities to network with more experienced dentists.

What groups were mentioned?

Women in dentistry, racial/cultural groups in dentistry (Black women in dentistry, for example). Women and minorities also found affinity elsewhere - in a shared set of goals, for example - Practice owners or public health dentistry, for example. This affinity could also be personal - mothers in dentistry, for instance.

People also brought up topic-based groups they'd like to join, suggesting examples that included "public health dentistry" or "sports dentistry" or "cosmetic dentistry".

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[A] women in dentistry group is really useful. And I also think that potentially based on like interest, [topic-based groups] like public health dentistry. I don't know if that's like, my end career goal. But I think for people who maybe have more of an interest in advocating for accessible care, like that could be a useful group within MDA just to like, have like minded practitioners like available to [connect with].

- Member dentist

Concept: Mental Health Support

Mental health comes up frequently in conversations with young dentists.

Patients are anxious

In interviews and then again in focus groups, the topic of anxious patients came up. Patients don't want to be there, and this seems to be a surprise for many early career dentists who want to help people that patients aren't excited about seeing them.

Anxiety spills over to young dentists

Anxious patients often make young dentists feel even more anxious. They're not just worried they might make a mistake, they are also extremely nervous about getting sued if they do. They think a lot about not taking risks because the patient might sue them and end their career that they just started. There is a pervasive fear among young dentists.

What can MDA do?

Include mental health sessions as CE credits, dinner & learn events, and even workshops. Young dentists were not keen on counseling services for dentists, but rather wanted to just have an open conversation about it with their peers to know that they are not alone in this somewhat debilitating fear, anxiety, and lack of confidence in their skills. This might be a powerful topic of focus in group mentoring sessions, for example.



I feel like as a dentist, you have to control the room, the patient does not control that room, because you cannot be out of control. So I think something that MDA can teach is, okay, if this person is having too much anxiety, or, you know, someone with anxiety is going to make you feel nervous, just based off just being close to them, you know, you're going to be scared to touch them in any wrong way. Now you're out of control. So I think them teaching us when is it appropriate to refer, and understanding our limits and those situations [that push us to our limits] so that we don't get reported to the Board and stuff like that... What tactical things [can calm an anxious patient].

- Member dentist

Concept: Job Matchmaking

The job hunt is a tremendously difficult and stressful process for dental students and early career dentists. Participants craved a more personalized touch for matching job seekers in Michigan with local dental practices who were recruiting.

Personalized matchmaking appeals to early career dentists.

Seeking jobs on platforms like Indeed or even more focused job boards is an impersonal and laborious process where people aren't sure if the jobs are even really looking, really hiring, or already filled. Time-intensive and laced with uncertainty and anxiety, finding a job after dental school can be tremendously hard without the proper network. If MDA could provide personalized job coaching and job matchmaking services, knowing which practices are serious about hiring and what kind of people they're looking for—this type of service would be a tremendous relief to job seekers, as well as a revenue-generator for MDA from practices seeking to hire exactly the “right fit” and looking to reduce time in interviewing people who aren't compatible.

Dental students know finding a job is much easier with a personal connection.

They want to work smarter, not harder, and would love to work with an organization like MDA to tailor their search. In addition to a vetted job board through MDA, young dentist job-seekers are looking for someone who can personally provide one-on-one coaching for them in their job search and pair them with possible fit practices in their area.

Right now, the way dental students think about their job search is to find a mentor at a practice that they love and work on developing a relationship, assuming that it may lead to a job. If MDA could provide personal insight / coaching into what type of practice someone might be a good fit for and then could coordinate practice visits with practices who are hiring as a way to foster connections between dentists as a next step to the matchmaking process, this would be a huge relief to students.

[I'm looking for] location-specific mentoring [because] I'm looking to stay in or near Ann Arbor. So [if] I'm going to be put into mentoring, I want it to lead to something. And I'm still going to stay in contact with some of my favorite faculty at the school [so] I can send them a text message and say, 'Hey, I'm having a trouble with this case'. But [when it comes to mentoring] I am looking for a job. I kind of have a hidden agenda.

- Dental student

Job boards are impersonal and a lot of times irrelevant to dentists looking for a job. Dentists hire because of personal connections, not random job applications.

- Member dentist

Through our residency... you can set up practice visits. And [I'd like that to be] something you can connect with someone from the MDA for, if you're looking for a job.

- Dental student

Concept: CE Tracking System

One pain point that would be an easy way for MDA to support dentists would be an online system to track CE credits.

Tracking CE credits is a painful, manual process

It involves spreadsheets, email filing systems, and reusable totes full of certificates.

What can MDA do?

Partner with cebroker.com for accounts for everyone included with their membership, or create their own CE tracker through the MDA app / website. This could coordinate with an easy calendar of trainings and prompt them to upload certificates post-training.

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I was just doing this [recording CE credits] this morning, actually. There's a website that I use called cebroker.com and they record all of your [credits]. You can like, upload your certificate. It's free. And so it can keep track of it all for you. That's way better than just normal Excel sheets.

- Member dentist

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I haven't been tracking them all that well. I just have like a little bag that I put all my certificates and I just keep it like in a reusable tote.

- Member dentist

“

I use a Google drive folder... but also have photos with certificates.

- Member dentist

Questions?

We are happy to answer any questions you may have.

Feel free to dive into the findings and send questions to virginia@bixaresearch.com, sarah@bixaresearch.com and rachel.gregory@bixaresearch.com

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