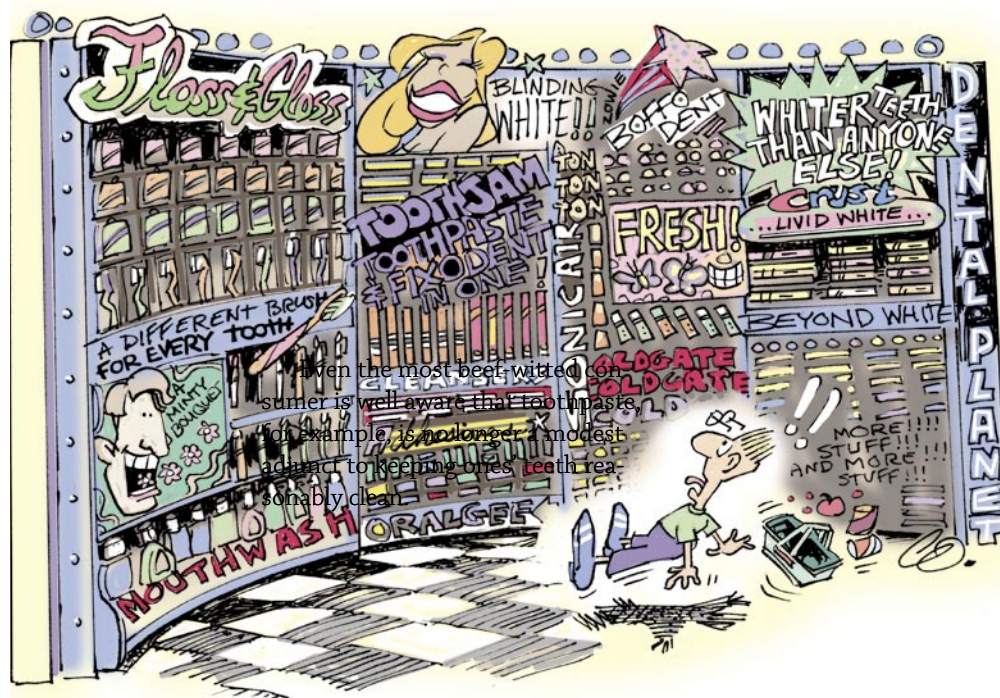


Product-palooza!



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→ Robert E. Horseman, DDS

ILLUSTRATION
BY CHARLIE O.
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The practice of dentistry has advanced so much in recent years that it is now impossible for a dentist **not** to find something wrong with you. Teeth that have hitherto appeared to be shining examples of Nature's finest effort, are revealed by laser devices as candidates for the endodontist. Anterior teeth that have appeared only yesterday to be in lovely juxtaposition, suddenly require the wizardly applications of porcelain to prevent their owner from immuring herself in a nunnery.

To keep pace with dentistry's advances, the pharmaceutical industry has proven itself to be no slacker when assigned the task of formulating cures, palliative and prevention drugs and devices. Short of an instant fix for a major maxillofacial catastrophe, such as one might encounter in a face-off with a Peterbilt truck, your local supermarket's formidable dental aisle has every imaginable answer to most of dentistry's problems.

- Toothache kit? Yes.
- Temporary cement? You bet!
- Tooth whitening paraphernalia?

Take your pick.

■ Bad breath? Paste, liquid or gel; no problem.

■ Mirrors, explorers, tongue scrapers, Quik-fix repair kits? Of course!

■ Implant kits? Coming.

Even the most beef-witted consumer is well aware that toothpaste, for example, is no longer a modest adjunct to keeping ones' teeth reasonably clean. Dentistry is beholden to public-spirited conglomerates like Colgate and Crest, among others, who enjoin the public via the media to spend less time worrying about the state of the world and pay more attention to its oral health. In reality, the companies should devote some thought to the frequent unsettling tableau wherein a customer, moaning piteously, lies prostrate in the aisle unable to decide between Crest's Whitening Expressions Refreshing Vanilla

CONTINUES ON 657

DR. BOB, CONTINUED FROM 658

Mint Liquid Gel and Colgate's Baking Soda & Peroxide Whitening Oxygen Bubbles Frosty Mint Striped Gel.

This dental bonanza is like a multiple-choice test with a hundred possible answers. The consumer's strategy is limited to eenie, meenie, minee, mo despite the fact that companies devote media campaigns to bind him in lifetime loyalty costing more than the total assets of many Third World countries. A mind-boggling scrolling of their Web sites confirms that Colgate, for instance, offers at least three dozen types of toothpastes. Crest, not to be outdone, proudly displays its multiple choices of toothpastes and gels. There are now enough toothbrush types for the conscientious brusher to have a different configuration for each of his or her 32 teeth.

I don't recall there ever being a public clamor for so many options.

IRATE CUSTOMER TO CLERK: Hey, how come there're only 10 kinds of toothpaste here? This is a supermarket?

CLERK (cowering): I'll call the manager!

The average patient, unless driven by some obscure dental angst encountered in a Krafft-Ebing 19th century textbook, is quite content with one flavor of toothpaste and one serviceable toothbrush he fondly believes should last him upward of a year. He selfishly has other fish to fry, so all this competition for the consumer's attention is immense.

One of life's tough decisions is when to discard a toothbrush. I once had a concept of a new type brush that announced its demise by harmlessly exploding when the bristles sagged 15 degrees out of vertical, much on the order of a trick exploding cigar. In deference to the companies that have done so much for us, I demurred in favor of their submission of bristles that gradually change color when a certain amount of time has passed. This requires the brusher to make a subjective analysis of hue and color saturation,

a task better assigned to an interior decorator. An ineffective solution, I feel, compared to my attention-grabbing alternative.

When Oral-B offers a baker's dozen of manual toothbrushes and Colgate counters with as many or more, to say nothing of those of other brands of brushes, what's a poor consumer to do?

"Ask your dentist," is the advice frequently proffered to bewildered patients when confronted with a 100-foot long aisle of dental products in the supermarket. Splendid idea, like asking your physician what to do about age spots on the back of your hands.

"What do you use?" the dentist hopes they don't ask. The answer be-

ing — if he's honest — "Whatever the company reps give me as samples." To paraphrase King Lear, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth to be an ungrateful recipient!" King Lear, by the way, was edentulous and lived the last years of his life entirely on gruel.

It behooves us as professional oral health persons responsible for the popular *Flossing for Dummies* manual, to become acquainted with even the lesser-known of these products if we are to make intelligent recommendations. Smug and irritating as it is, sound advice such as "You are required to floss only the teeth you want to keep" should do much to reduce the confusion of runaway multiple choices. ■■■■