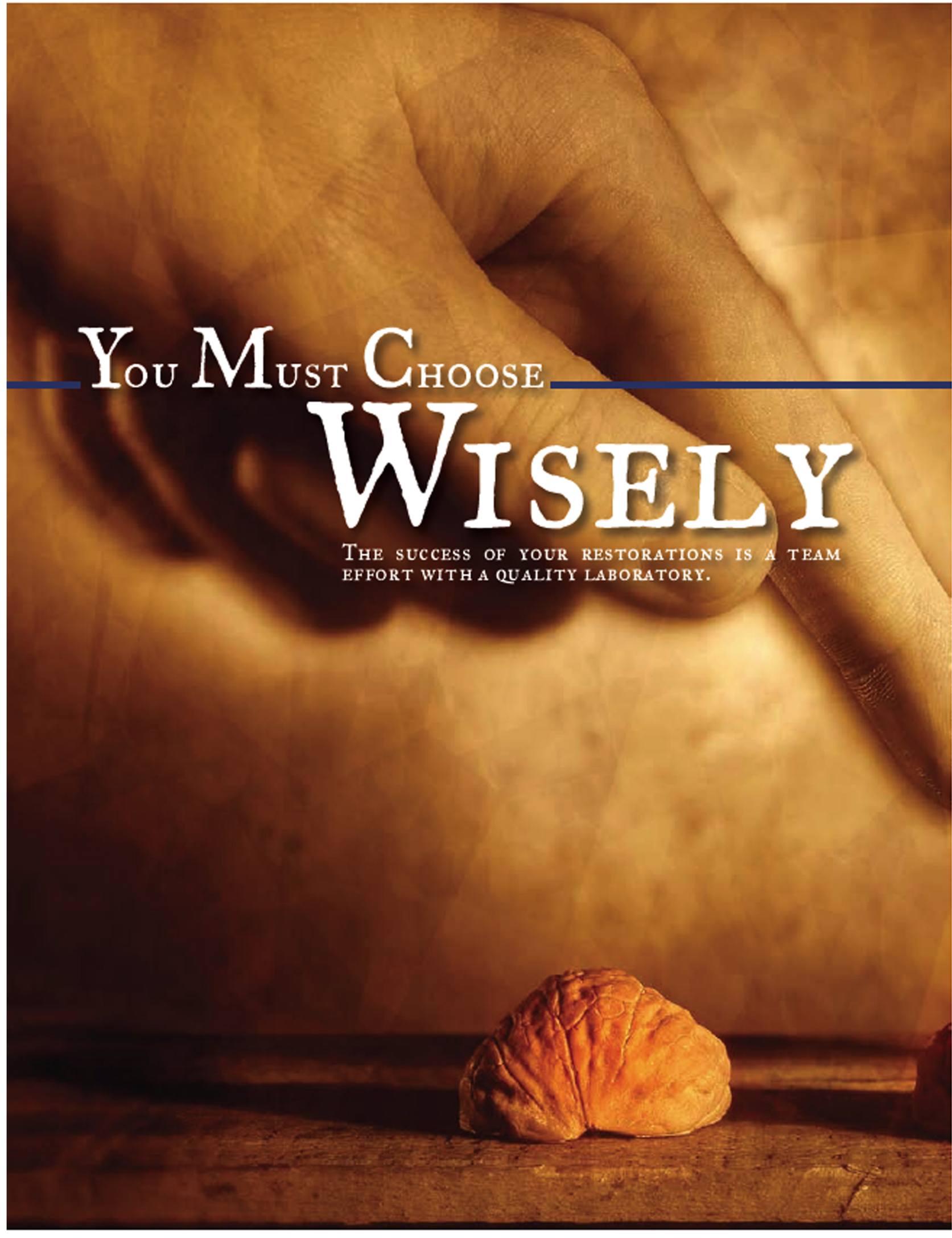
You Must Choose
Wisely
The success of your restorations is a team effort with a quality laboratory.

Have you ever had to convince a patient that his restorations were as good as they were going to get? The frustration of sending the restorations back and forth from the lab started to get the best of you and you accepted a substandard job. But with good communication and the right lab you can turn these cases around, become a hero in these situations, and give patients the smiles that they have always wanted. Unlike the proverbial shell game, all you must do is choose your lab wisely.

Dentists often use several labs—one for dentures, another for basic crowns and bridges, and yet another for implants. Because this multiple lab tango can be confusing and expensive, it makes sense to find a lab that can handle all restorative and prosthetic needs. This lab should know about all the newest materials and be involved with their manufacture. The lab should even act as a partner actively involved in research and at the forefront of new procedure development.

When you choose a lab, ask to see the lab's portfolio of before and after cases. A good lab's before and after pictures do not all look the same. This discrepancy shows the lab's creativity and ability to match a smile to specific facial types and personalities. Restorations that are biomimetic will replicate nature.

Sophisticated labs offer continuing education and technical support to bridge the gap between the doctor and the lab. Continuing education ensures that the doctor and lab are on the same page with occlusion philosophy, smile design, materials, and new technology—providing priceless camaraderie and support. To avoid trouble, it is important that your lab have the experience to help you with technical questions and catch problems that you may overlook.

Technician Style

Every lab technician has a unique style—like an artist—which can be very subjective. When you choose a technician within the lab, ask these questions: How is the technician with color? Does he or she create proper line angles, incisal edges, and anatomy? How does he relate facial types to smile design? Do you share common opinions on these design criteria? Do his restorations look the same? What may look good to the technician may not be what you or the patient has in mind. You must familiarize yourself with the type of work you like the most.

Part of working with a good lab is developing harmony between the doctor, patient, and technician. Sometimes a particular technician may not be the correct fit. For example, I use different technicians for my older patients and my younger patients. I can usually determine the right technician to use by showing my patients before and after pictures to learn the style they prefer. It's much like using the smile catalog. Before and

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after pictures can be your lab technician catalog.

Two recent cases demonstrate how different technician styles can affect outcome. In both situations (photos 1 & 3), the patients were not happy with their restorations. The relationship between the doctor and the patient suffered because of the compromised results. Both patients decided to leave their doctor and have a new doctor redo their restorations. Once the new doctor removed the restorations, he discovered that the bond was good and the preps were acceptable. The reason these cases failed was because the first doctor did not use a competent lab. The lab failed to get the proper information and therefore delivered an unacceptable product. The new doctor only had to select a quality lab and communicate effectively to switch each patient from a desperate situation to a beautiful, comfortable smile (photos 2 & 4).

Quality without Compromise

To avoid similar situations, you must choose your lab wisely. If you skimp on quality, it will cost you more in the long run. Make sure the lab requires the proper tools to get the smile just right. They should give you a checklist of everything they will need to get started. This checklist is preliminary, so expect the lab to ask for models, photos, different bite registrations, etc., to create the successful outcome you desire.

Checklist for Wise Solutions

- Maxillary arch with hamular notches and mandibular impressions (suggest these be taken in polyvinyl for accuracy and duplicate casts) Outline cast to designate where tissue contouring is needed. Be sure to get a very accurate impression of gum tissue! It will save a lot of time in the temporary phase of treatment.
- Smile design from either patient mock-up or smile catalog. Magazines are also helpful. This is the first line of communication.
- Bite registration (a hard acrylic bite registration will help mounting problems and minimize technician error)
- Stick bite with horizontal and vertical components
- Photographs (see samples)
- Shimbashi vertical measurements (gumline to gumline or CEJ to CEJ)

After receiving the completed checklist, a good lab will fabricate the wax-up and other necessary items to begin treatment. The diagnostic wax-up can help you plan your case and get the patient's acceptance. It is very important that the lab takes extra care in managing tissue heights and contours in the wax-up and temporary matrices. Clear margins and clean lines are a sign of good lab work and will save the doctor later headaches.

The degree of treatment success will depend on the accuracy of information the doctor supplies to the lab. A quality, comprehensive lab will provide the following items:

- Wax-up
- Prep-guide
- Surgical stint (surgical template)
- Temporary matrix
- Transfer bite (used when changing vertical)
- Tissue contours marked on casts
- Laboratory characterization guides (such as the Elite Characterization Guide from Arrowhead Laboratory)

If you want to keep costs to a minimum, find out your lab's shipping policy and carrier. Shipping back and forth can add up hundreds of dollars for just one case.

Budget, of course, plays a role in choosing a lab. But, if you focus on the price per unit, then all your lab work is going to be expensive. Remember that using a good lab is less expensive than rescheduling the patient or redoing the case.

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Joseph Willardsen is a graduate of Loma Linda University School of Dentistry. His expertise in marketing and aesthetic dentistry has allowed him to maintain a successful cosmetic and neuromuscular practice in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Photos 1–2 and 3–4 show referenced before-and-after photos. Photos 5–12 reflect other photos you should send to your lab.