



A Sure Bet

Dr. Joe Willardsen didn't want to gamble with his future, so he used marketing, continuing education, and a vision to come up a winner in the high-stakes world of Las Vegas dentistry

**Story by Kevin Henry, Managing Editor
Photos by IndigoBleue Photography**

the ADA Annual Session closes.

"It is Las Vegas, so our patient base includes cocktail waitresses, executive chefs, and exotic dancers, but we also have patients who are housewives and electricians," Dr. Willardsen said. "A lot of patients have had dental work in the past and they simply aren't happy with it. My message is that this is a new type of dentistry. It is 'true dentistry.' They don't have to drive or fly to Los Angeles to have their problems solved."

It took more than Dr. Willardsen's family pedigree to get his message to the public and build a successful practice. Dr. Willardsen has invested countless continuing-education hours at Las Vegas Institute and Arrowhead Dental Laboratory and has also used countless marketing avenues to get his name and the message of "true dentistry" to the public.

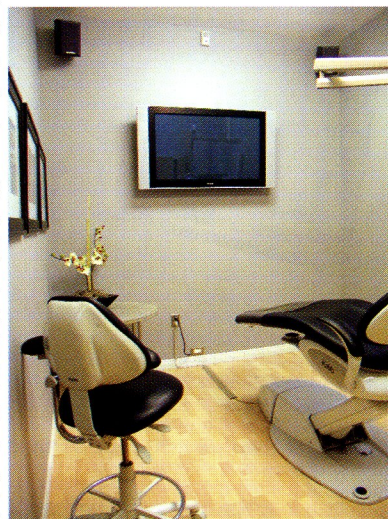
"When I was taking my board exams, there were 300 registered dentists in Las Vegas. The next year, that number doubled. I had to make my name stand out," Dr. Willardsen said. "I found a way to advertise in *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, and

To say that Dr. Joe Willardsen has dentistry in his blood is an understatement. With a father who practiced in Palm Springs, Calif., and two brothers practicing in Las Vegas and Palm Springs, there is plenty of "tooth talk" when the Willardsens get together for a family dinner.

But there is much more to Dr. Joe Willardsen's view of dentistry than just dentistry. Using the concept of "true dentistry," Dr. Willardsen has grown his practice from nothing to two dental offices in just two years.

"The whole idea behind 'true dentistry' is creating a place that is customer-oriented. I wanted to create the Nordstrom's of dentistry," Dr. Willardsen said. "I wanted everything to be up-to-date in my practice, including the logos, equipment, and office décor. I wanted to create a place that I didn't know existed in Las Vegas."

To create something that doesn't exist in Las Vegas is a feat in and of itself, but it's obvious that Dr. Willardsen is on to something. His one-operatory office on Sahara Avenue is bursting at the seams, and his new three-operatory facility in southwest Las Vegas will be open shortly after



Viva Las Vegas



So where would a resident of Las Vegas recommend you visit when you're in his city for the ADA Annual Session? We asked Dr. Joe Willardsen for his favorite places to see, eat, and relax in Las Vegas. Here's what he said ...

DE: I have to ask about the famous Las Vegas Strip. Everyone who comes to Vegas has to hit the Strip at least once, right? If a visiting dentist is going to go to the Strip and only has a short amount of time, what should he or she definitely see?

JW: It's strange because, when you live in Las Vegas, you really forget about the Strip. It's a destination more for tourists than those of us who live here. I would definitely recommend seeing the fountains at Bellagio and the shark reef at the Mandalay Bay.

DE: Since you're a local guy, where would you take me if I was coming into town for a day ... other than going to the Strip?

JW: Red Rock Canyon. There is great biking, hiking, and other outdoor activities. There is a one-way road going into Red Rock, so there's not a lot of traffic. It's a great place. There is also Lake Mead and Hoover Dam. The hiking is great there as well.

DE: What are some of your favorite restaurants?

JW: Sensi at Bellagio is excellent. One of my patients is the executive chef at Wynn, and I know all of their restaurants are great. If you're looking for sushi, it's hard to beat Nobu at the Hard Rock Casino.

DE: After eating, what would be the plan?

JW: Las Vegas has some of the best nightlife in the world. Three great clubs are Tryst (Wynn), Body English (Hard Rock), and Pure (Caesar's Palace).

DE: Let's say I'm not the world's best dancer. What other nighttime activity would you recommend?

JW: There are great shows in Las Vegas. I would recommend any of the Cirque du Soleil shows. There are four of them in Vegas and they are all outstanding.

DE: Any other hidden Vegas gems you'd recommend?

JW: Make sure you go to the Red Rock Casino, Resort, and Spa. They spent more money building it than they spent on the Bellagio. It is an amazing hotel.

Contact information

Bellagio, www.bellagio.com, 702-693-7111

Caesar's Palace, www.harrah.com, 877-427-7243

Cirque du Soleil, www.cirquedusoleil.com, various hotels

Hard Rock Casino, www.hardrockhotel.com, 800-HRD-ROCK

Hoover Dam, www.usbr.gov/lc/hooverdam, 702-494-2517

Lake Mead, www.nps.gov/lame/, 702-293-8990

Mandalay Bay, www.mandalaybay.com, 702-632-7777

Red Rock Casino, Resort, and Spa, www.redrocklasvegas.com, 702-797-7777

Red Rock Canyon, www.redrockcanyonlv.com, 702-515-5350

Wynn Las Vegas, www.wynnlasvegas.com, 702-770-7000

other magazines. I was invited to be the dentist on a local television program called 'The Wellness Hour,' which airs four times per week."

The expanded media presence attracted the patients, but it was the in-office marketing that made them stay in Dr. Willardsen's practice.

"Consumers have to be able to see what you can do, and that includes showing them before-and-after shots of other patients with similar situations," Dr. Willardsen explained. "If you want to do cosmetic dentistry, it simply can't be done without marketing. You not only have to do a lot of cosmetic dentistry, but you also have to do a lot of marketing. I heard a recent poll where 40 to 45 percent of patients say they have a general dentist, but he or she doesn't do cosmetic dentistry. Can you believe that? All it takes is a gallery of before-and-after shots to show your patients you can do the work."

"I know people will read this article and say I'm able to do some of this marketing only because I'm in Las Vegas. This is an amazing city with so many opportunities, but I know the dentist who is in the middle of farmland in Iowa can find this same kind of success with the right marketing."





While training and marketing have been two of the secrets behind Dr. Willardsen's success, the third has the biggest impact on his practice — his staff.

"My staff members can't be beat," Dr. Willardsen smiled. "I love the fact that we're all on the same level of thinking when it comes to this practice. We built this practice together. I also love that none of my staff members came from a dental back-

ground, so they entered my practice without any prejudices or bad habits. People skills are the key and their attitude is great.

"I think the patients like them more than me," he chuckled. "I owe a lot of this practice's success to them."

Dr. Willardsen designed his practices to have a clean and modern look and feel. While some might quickly label it a "spa practice," the 34-year-old Loma Linda graduate doesn't necessarily agree.

"We did set up the office to feel like a spa, but how can we compete with the spas at Mandalay Bay or Bellagio?" Dr. Willardsen asked. "We don't want patients to come here because it's a spa. We want them to come here because they believe this is the place to have their cosmetic dreams realized. We emphasize dental health and beauty, and we tell people we are the experts. I believe our work is just as good or better than anyone else in Las Vegas."

The belief in the high quality of his work has allowed Dr. Willardsen to focus on the patients who he feels are the best fit for his practice. Not every patient who comes to Dr. Willardsen stays on as a patient, and that has helped his practice grow even more, he said.

"I can read a patient fairly quickly, and it's not hard to see if that patient fits in with our office philosophy," he explained. "I know most dentists don't want to see a patient and his or her money walk out the door, but I feel like not having to deal with someone who could be a problem patient will save me money in the long run.

"When I first got out of school, I felt like I had to be the doctor for everyone. I eventually learned that I can't do that. It was a hard adjustment for me to learn to say no to some people, but it has paid off."

Part of the payoff is Dr. Willardsen's second practice. Now just a few days from opening, Dr. Willardsen believes it will set a new standard in Las Vegas.

"I don't know how to describe it other than to say it

is really cool," Dr. Willardsen beamed. "I think it's above and beyond any office I've ever seen. I know our contractor and Henry Schein contacts have been wowed as it has come into reality. We have the same interior designer who worked on the Hard Rock Casino and the Bellagio, so it really has a hotel feel to it. Like the other office, it has a spa feel but does not have a spa theme. It is very much a beauty office. It will have a teaching facility and an esthetician will be on staff to help our patients. It also gives me a chance to work alongside one of my brothers. John, who teaches at Loma Linda and practices in Palm Springs, will be in the office each week doing implants."

With John working alongside and other brother Jim not far away (you can read about him and his practice in this month's issue of *Dental Equipment & Materials*), there are plenty of opportunities for the Willardsens to get together. But the camaraderie (and maybe a touch of sibling rivalry) goes beyond dentistry. The trio and another brother, Jared, who works as a sports videographer, are avid racers. They've competed for years on the motocross track, and they are currently preparing to tackle the Baja 1000, an endurance truck race, in November.

"All four brothers will be in the same truck and we'll each race about 250 miles," Dr. Joe Willardsen explained, adding that a pit crew of about 20 people will be helping the brothers navigate their way through the desert. "We've been racing on motorcycles since we were kids, so we thought this would be a lot of fun to try."

It hasn't always been easy or painless. Broken wrists and ankles are among the injuries the brothers have sustained. Joe had to fill in for John during his implant residency after John broke both ankles in a motocross accident the night before his implant study club was to meet.

"He didn't tell me I'd have to set up with fresh human heads, so that was a surprise for me at 3 a.m. to look in the bags and see them," Dr. Joe Willardsen laughed. "I think I still owe him for that one."

And how does dentistry and racing fit together?

"Well, dentistry pays the bills," he chuckled. "Racing is a good stress relief for all of us and it's a chance for us to be together."

Racing trucks and advertising in national magazines may not be on the resume of many dentists around the country, but it has worked well for Dr. Willardsen. He believes the success he has found in Las Vegas can be duplicated anywhere — with the correct attitude.

"I think we're on the edge of a new generation of dentistry. Saying that you should keep doing the same things because that's the way you've always done them just won't work any more," he said. "You have to make changes in order to obtain your dreams and desires. With the right mindset, anything can be done. If you see something you want for you and your practice, you have to believe it's obtainable — and you have to have the courage to go for it." **DE**