

#13
DR. MICHAEL APA

Dentistry's one-man
megabrand

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13

THE PERFECTIONIST

MICHAEL APA

COSMETIC DENTIST, APA AESTHETIC
NEW YORK, NEW YORK; LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA; DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
(NEW)

IT'S HARD TO REMEMBER A TIME before people could be famous for nothing at all. Pre-social media, you earned respect and became influential through hard work and accomplishments. It's easy to Google No. 13, Dr. Michael Apa, and assume his success stemmed from the same kind of self-promotional savvy that turns ordinary Instagrammers into stars. But the truth is, it was a long, challenging road, and all the marketing in the world wouldn't have meant anything were there nothing to back it up.

If you're going to tell the story right, how Dr. Apa, 43, got here is almost more important than where he is. As early as age 5, he wanted to become a dentist, and through the mentoring of his own dentist he learned of Dr. Larry Rosenthal, a cosmetic specialist in New York who would help launch his career.

Once he got to dental school, though, he got a hard slap on the face when he realized he might not get a chance to work with Dr. Rosenthal (or someone like him) unless he switched schools, in this case to NYU—at a tuition nearly eight times what he was paying. “People tell you ‘You can’t, you can’t, you can’t,’” he says. His mentors made a compelling case for staying put. He went anyway: “You have to have the conviction to live your life.”

NYU didn't have a cosmetic-dentistry program at the time, so Dr. Apa created one, of a sort, forming an aesthetics study club with the aim of inviting professionals to come and lecture. You probably know the rest of the story: He graduated, went to work for Dr. Rosenthal as planned, became a partner in 2005, *Allure* and *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* came calling, then overnight, he came the closest a dentist has ever gotten to being a genuine celebrity.

Except that's not how it happened at all.

DO IT MORE, DO IT BETTER

“I really wasn't that good when I first started,” he says. “I just *wanted* to be. It wasn't some natural talent. Dr. Rosenthal gave me more and more cases to do, because he wanted to start doing fewer. I'm good at what I do now because I do it more than anyone else, period.”

What he does is flawless, natural-looking veneers that run about \$4,000 a tooth. Yes, there's a Hollywood-luxe sensibility to it all that has helped attract more than half a million followers to his Instagram account. Yes, if you press him, he might name a few names and tell you he has treated members of 15 royal families. No, not a single one chose him solely because they think he's internet-cool in a trendy but far-too-committed-to-perfection-in-dentistry kind of way.

If for some reason you doubt it, just look at his completed cases. Patients may like his style, but that style is informed by obsessive attention to detail to a point where you actually worry about how hard the guy must be on himself. Searching for authenticity on social media? Follow any of Dr. Apa's accounts. If every suit is perfectly tailored, every wristwatch tastefully chosen, it's because he knows patients expect a level of perfectionism in him beyond





dentistry. Yet for every photo of him or his team, there's probably five or six or more of actual cases. That's where his head's really at. Nobody said perfectionism is easy.

Take his ceramists, for example. He keeps an immigration lawyer on retainer because he recruits from around the world, and when he finds someone with great chops who can thrive in his practice's culture, he does whatever is necessary. His labs are basically a business within a business, operating at an exceptionally high level to service one single client: Apa Aesthetic.

The Apa Beauty line of oral-care products—pout-pumping lip glosses, alcohol-free mouthwash, sexy electric toothbrushes (really) and much more—are perennial recommendations on *Vogue* magazine's holiday gift guides, and only high-end online retailers, such as Net-a-Porter, sell them.

"These things," says Dr. Apa, speaking of the thousands upon thousands of small decisions that have gone into building his burgeoning empire, "are more intuitive."

That's because things have gone wrong for him as much as they've gone right. He'll tell you the details off the record—not because he's embarrassed, but more to protect the innocent. Being flexible enough to pivot often means turning your back on months or years of hard work if it isn't leading to the right place. That stops most people in their tracks. Dr. Apa's solution is to keep an endpoint in sight, and power through whatever obstacles emerge rather than religiously following the original plan.

His overnight success didn't even start until 2014, when he bought out his mentor's stake in the practice. As his reputation grew, he didn't muscle his way into Dubai or Los Angeles on the heels of some kind of big-money marketing or PR

“ We've been working so hard to grow, and this time has enabled me to evaluate and plan for the best direction forward. **”**

push; he simply went where there was demand, and he had a pretty good feel for where he'd be best received.

Did he help stoke that demand? Absolutely. How else do you get a foot in the door? For example, when he wanted to try Dubai, he simply went right for it, reaching out to the international publisher for Hearst Magazines, who arranged a meeting with the editor in chief of *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*. "I ended up doing her teeth," Dr. Apa says. "She wrote a first-person story on it, and it exploded my career in Dubai."

He is, however, acutely aware that his practice can get only so big without his making compromises, something he's deadly allergic to. That's why any expansion has been so careful, so deliberate, so painstakingly planned. Today, he has 86 carefully chosen employees who make the current scope manageable because they buy into the practice's values 100 percent. "I expect excellence," he says. "They know it. I don't need to tell them anything. This wouldn't work otherwise."

WHAT LIES AHEAD

When Covid-19 rocked the world, Dr. Apa responded about how you'd expect. He created basically another company within a company for testing, starting with antibody tests. By late March, he was sending swabs to the lab and developing a complex protocol for mitigating risk

so he could continue treating patients as restrictions eased.

"This has, no doubt, been a tough time with a substantial toll on life, and at times it can be hard to see a silver lining in it all," he says. "What it has taught me is that, like anything, when you're on a track for growth, there are times when the opportunity presents itself to self-analyze and reflect."

"We have been working so hard, especially these recent years, to grow as an international business, and this time has allowed me to evaluate and consider all that we have done and all that we want to do in the future to truly plan for the best direction forward, which is never a bad thing," he adds, philosophically. "We will come out of this."

Someday soon, he'll get back to traveling 16-ish times a year to Dubai, about the same to Los Angeles and, of course, seeing patients at a pre-Covid pace at the primary office in New York. By his estimation, no one in the world does veneers as frequently as he does. It's a good bet the slower pace is eating at him. "This team around me is so efficient, I can do five patients in a day."

Still, despite what you may have seen or read, the Michael Apa you might think you know isn't betting on media attention to carry him through his second act. "I'm not old, but I'm also not young anymore," he says. "Doing the kind of dentistry I want to do, that *patients* want me to do, that's what this has always been about." —Edward Kobesky