

# **ESSENTIAL MARKETING SKILLS FOR DENTISTS**

**DISCOVER THE NEW BASICS FOR ATTRACTING  
FIRST-RATE PATIENTS TO YOUR OFFICE!**

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# INTRODUCTION

## Dental Marketing: The Pathway to Profitability

### Why You Need Dental Marketing

In the past, it didn't take too much effort to build a growing dental practice. You simply set up shop in a good location, practiced your craft with skill and dedication, and built a good reputation. In doing so, you attracted a strong base of loyal patients who trusted you with their dental needs time and time again. However, even if you have all these elements in place, chances are you're finding it harder than ever to secure your fair share of lucrative patients.

Why? Because the world has changed. Competition in the dental field has increased ten-fold. Nowadays it seems like there's a dentist on every corner, and each day, more and more competitors enter the field. Whereas before you could simply open the doors and wait for a steady stream of patients to walk through, now you have to compete with several other dentists for each and every patient. At the same time, dentists are competing more and more with dermatologists, plastic surgeons, laser eye treatment — even travel and luxury items — for their patients' discretionary income.

Worse, there's no guarantee that the patients you do manage to attract to your practice will keep coming back. In today's highly mobile society, people change jobs and move away with amazing regularity. Even if they don't move, their employers often change insurance carriers, which usually requires them to switch dentists. To top it all off, people have more choices than ever before. If they don't like the quality of service they receive from you, they can go down the street to another dentist and you never see them again. When faced with these conditions, marketing your dental practice becomes a necessity not a luxury.

The good news is that more and more dentists are acknowledging the need for marketing. The bad news is that very few are getting the results they want. Why? Our research uncovered six basic reasons:

1. **Lack of action.** Many dentists spend time and money putting together a marketing plan, but never get around to the implementation. Marketing doesn't happen by itself; you have to make it happen!
2. **Unrealistic expectations.** Many dentists expect overnight results, and they give up when those results don't materialize as quickly as expected.

3. **Lack of perseverance.** Marketing is like a marathon, not a 100-yard dash. The rewards go to those who set a steady, sustainable pace.
4. **Poor planning and/or decision making.** Many dentists jump from one marketing tool to another with no real understanding of how they work together. Marketing tools yield the best results when employed as part of a comprehensive plan.
5. **“Nothing new” syndrome.** Some dentists keep searching for the next fad to solve all their marketing problems in one fell swoop. However, that approach never works. The best marketers rely on proven tools and techniques to get the job done.
6. **“Me too” ads and marketing materials.** Too many dentists simply mimic what’s already out there. You can’t expect to distinguish yourself from the competition if your marketing materials look and sound just like theirs.

Despite these obstacles, you can take charge of the marketing function and grow your dental practice in the manner you want. All it takes is an understanding of the fundamental principles involved and a commitment on your part to making it happen. To successfully market a dental practice in today’s world, you need to accomplish three basic objectives:

1. Find (or develop) a niche for your dental practice.
2. Create a sharply focused core marketing message that describes how you serve your niche.
3. Deliver that message in a manner that enables you to stand out from your competitors.

The whole purpose of this booklet is to help you accomplish these goals in a timely and cost-effective manner.

### **Your Role in Marketing Your Dental Practice**

Many dentists view marketing as a complex, confusing activity better left to the Harvard M.B.A.’s and high-priced advertising agencies of the world. But if you think you have to wear a three-piece suit and work on Madison Avenue to be a top-notch marketer, think again. When it comes to your own dental practice, you can (and should) be the #1 marketing expert. All it takes some knowledge of marketing fundamentals and the willingness to pay attention to the world around you.

The main purpose of marketing is to identify the appropriate markets for your products and services and then open up a conversation with those markets. For dentists, that means identifying the segment of your community that could benefit from your dental services and communicating with them in a manner that motivates them to want to do business with you.

Becoming a marketing whiz doesn’t require a college degree in marketing. And it doesn’t have to cost an arm and a leg. To develop your marketing skills to their fullest:

- **Stay current with new developments in the field of marketing.** Generic, bland marketing messages are a thing of the past. In today's world, only a carefully crafted message has a chance of getting through to your target audience. To stay current with emerging marketing trends:
  - Commit to reading one marketing book per quarter. Bookstore shelves are full of marketing books that address the needs of small businesses and professional practices.
  - Attend a marketing seminar at least once a year. You can pick up many good ideas in a half- or full-day workshop.
  - Have the latest marketing news delivered to your "e-doorstep." Web sites like [www.actionplan.com](http://www.actionplan.com) and our own [www.DentalMarketingCenter.com](http://www.DentalMarketingCenter.com) allow you to automatically receive customized news and information (via e-mail) on subjects of your choosing.
- **Know your target audience.** One of the best ways to learn about your target market is to see how other businesses market to them. Study the media and the messages they use to promote their products and services. What do they do that might apply to your practice?

Keep in mind that women are increasingly making the dental services decisions throughout American households. For that reason, it pays to browse women-oriented Web sites like [oprah.com](http://oprah.com), [momsonline.com](http://momsonline.com) and [chickclick.com](http://chickclick.com). In addition, scan magazines like *Vogue* and *Vanity* on a regular basis. The more you know about your target audience in general, the better you can communicate with them in their language.

- **Expand your horizons.** Creativity experts say that the best new ideas in an industry often come from *outside* that industry. The same holds true for dental marketing. This doesn't mean to stop reading your dental magazines and industry journals. However, to become a more effective marketer, you need to supplement industry ideas by scanning entirely different fields and finding ways to apply their best ideas to your dental practice.
- **Study your competitor's marketing materials.** In addition to the message, pay close attention to the look and feel of your competitors' marketing materials. What impression do they convey to you? Do the materials instill confidence and make you want to learn more about their products and services?

Sign up for your competitors' newsletters, visit their Web sites, get on their mailing lists, and pay attention to their advertising. There is nothing wrong or unethical about this — it's just plain good business. Besides, you can bet that they're doing the same thing to you.

- **Pays attention to what works.** There's an old saying that "nothing succeeds like success." To get good at marketing, study what works — starting with yourself. What kinds of advertisements and marketing messages get *your* attention? What turns you off and what do you respond to? More important, why?

Pay attention to long-running ads and ad campaigns. Advertising costs a lot of money, and companies won't continue an ad unless it gets the desired response. If an ad keeps running for weeks, months or even years, something about it must be working. Study the ad and try to identify what might be motivating people to respond to it.

- **Be consistent.** Marketing is not an on-again/off-again activity. It requires discipline and consistency in order to succeed.
- **Take action.** The biggest problem for most dentists is the failure to translate marketing ideas into concrete action steps that gets results.

To engage in effective marketing, open your eyes and your mind, be receptive to new ideas and learn to think outside the box. Above all, pay close attention to what matters to your patients. Know what they want and how they want it and then deliver on those expectations.

### Creating a Flexible Marketing Plan

Dentistry is a highly personal service. Just as your personality plays a large role in attracting and retaining patients, it also has a lot to do with how you build your practice. Some dentists prefer aggressive, hard-hitting marketing campaigns that involve a lot of advertising and high visibility. Others feel more comfortable using a soft-spoken, gentle approach. Whatever path you take, the secret to success lies in creating an *adaptable* marketing plan that fits your personality and marketing style.

An adaptable dental marketing plan allows you to:

- Pick and choose the marketing tools that fit your personal style as well as the needs of your practice.
- Communicate with your patients and prospective patients on a highly personal level.
- Stop wasting your dollars on ineffective, one-dimensional advertising.
- Grow your dental practice in the most cost-effective manner possible.

You only have so many dollars to allocate to your marketing budget. And you can only take so much time away from your patients to grow your practice. An adaptable dental practice marketing plan will ensure that you get the results you want. To create and implement a marketing plan that addresses the specific needs of your dental practice, use the following six-step process:

#### Step 1. Define your goals and objectives.

The first, and most important step is to define your goals (most marketing plans will have several). What *exactly* do you want to accomplish? Increase the number of new patients you see? Do more of a certain procedure? Expand into a new geographical area? Increase total monthly billings?

Whatever you decide on, make your goals specific, quantifiable and measurable. For example, “Our goal is to attract 100 new patients each quarter.” Or, “Our goal is to increase monthly billings by 10 percent.” Without specific, measurable goals, you have no way of determining the success of your plan. One caveat: make sure your goals are realistic. It doesn’t do any good to set overly ambitious goals that you stand no chance of achieving.

### **Step 2. Establish realistic deadlines.**

A major cause of failure with many marketing plans is trying to do too much too soon. Unrealistic deadlines can cause you to rush through or skip key steps, which leads to poor quality decisions that adversely impact the plan. Allow enough time to accomplish your goals without putting undue pressure on yourself or anyone else involved in the project.

### **Step 3. Break the plan down into “bite-size” pieces.**

There’s an old saying that you eat an elephant one bite at a time. The same holds true for comprehensive marketing plans. To reduce your plan to manageable pieces, first make a list of all the steps involved. Next, arrange the steps in sequential order. Often, more than one step needs to be completed at the same time. Those can be grouped into blocks or segments.

### **Step 4. Delegate tasks and responsibilities.**

At this stage, the marketing plan moves from planning to action. This requires assigning specific responsibilities to yourself, your staff members and/or any outside professionals you have hired to assist with implementing your plan.

When delegating a task/responsibility:

- Clearly define the task and your expected outcome.
- Explain what the person can do on their own and when they should come to you for assistance and/or approval.
- Set a date for completing the task.
- Set a date to follow up and check the results.

The key to successful delegation is communication. Make sure the person understands exactly what you want done and how you want it done. Encourage them to come to you with questions at any time during completion of the task.

### **Step 5. Monitor progress.**

This is probably the most over-looked step in the entire process. In many ways it is also the most important. Some people like to monitor the progress of their marketing plans by using computer soft-

ware programs such as Outlook or Excel. Others use separate file folders for each task and track the plan manually. Still others prefer to jot down a few bullet-point reminders on a yellow legal pad. However you do it, the key is to create a written timeline of what needs to be done, who will do it and by when, and who will hold them accountable for doing it.

Monitoring your progress on a regular basis provides two important outcomes:

- It ensures that your plan stays on schedule and keeps things from falling through the cracks.
- It allows you to make corrections and adjustments as you go along.

If you're a "big picture" person and don't like getting bogged down in detail, delegate the task of monitoring the plan to someone else. Without this critical step, you run the risk of getting very different results than you anticipated, or worse, no results at all.

### **Step 6. Review the plan on a regular basis.**

At regular intervals, gather your team members together to review progress toward the goals. In addition to assessing the outcome, it also helps to analyze the process you used to design and implement the plan. This involves asking the questions like:

- What went well during this plan?
- What did not go well?
- Did we leave out or overlook any steps?
- What could we do to improve the next time around?
- Did we accomplish our goals? If not, why not?
- What do we need to do differently in order to achieve our goals?

If you fall short of your intended goals, don't use the review session to point fingers or cast blame. Instead, conduct an honest assessment of what happened and look for ways to do better next time. If things went well and you achieved your goal, give plenty of recognition and reward to all who contributed.

Planning may seem like a lot of extra work, especially for those trying to run a busy dental practice. But the time you invest up front to plan, organize and track the process will pay tremendous dividends in the end.

### **Additional Resources**

For more good ideas on how to market a small professional services business, we recommend the following books:

- "Selling the Invisible," by Harry Beckwith (Warner Books)
- "Marketing Your Services" by Anthony Putman (John Wiley & Sons)

- “Marketing Magic” by Don Debelak (Bob Adams, Inc.)

## CHAPTER 1

# ELEMENTS OF MARKETING

### Elements of Contemporary Dental Marketing

In our introduction, we defined marketing as the art of engaging your target market in an ongoing conversation about the benefits of your products and services. The primary purpose of marketing, therefore, is to communicate the benefits of your products and services so that your target market feels motivated to use them.

Unfortunately, they don't cover that topic in dental school. They teach you how to restore oral health and give people beautiful smiles, but they don't teach you how to create effective marketing messages. Fortunately, crafting effective marketing conversations with your patients and prospective patients isn't nearly as hard as it looks. Simply follow the "Who, What, How" format:

- **Who**

The first thing to decide in any conversation is *who* will be your partner in the dialogue. For dentists, this requires determining who your patients are and, more important, who they should be. To gather this vital information:

- Collect basic demographic information (income, age, gender, education, etc.) about your current client base.
- Study their interests, character and lifestyles.
- Carefully review a sample of your best patients' records, trying to identify common characteristics.
- Step back and analyze your own preferences. Try to be consistent between your professional style and the reality of your geographic location and practice personality.

- **What**

To determine *what* to talk about, simply listen to your patients' problems. Do they need basic restoration work? Cosmetic treatment? Specialized work? Do they have adequate insurance or do expensive treatments present payment problems? Strive to pinpoint the problems that affect a significant number of potential new patients. After all, no marketing program can succeed by catering to the exceptions.

Build your message around the problem/solution framework. For example, BriteSmile, a rapidly growing dental firm in the Southern California area, detected the problem of waiting for the whitening procedure to show results. They responded with the following message — “A whiter smile, by tonight!” Another dental practice found itself treating a large number of uninsured patients. Its solution? Offering an extended no-interest payment plan.

When determining the *what* for your dental practice, ask the right questions and then listen closely. Your patients will tell you their needs, which will form the basis for your marketing message.

- **How**

Once you have developed real clarity around the who and the what, then you can focus on *how* to best convey your message. Keep in mind that when it comes to your marketing message, people will listen only if you directly address *their* problems, needs and concerns, not yours.

*How* you communicate your message involves a lot more than just deciding which medium (print, radio, direct mail, Internet, etc.) to use. It also includes:

- Communicating your presence to the right audience
- Positioning (how you distinguish your practice from competitors)
- Convincing presentation of your treatment plan

To improve your marketing efforts, stop thinking about marketing as a complex activity that requires a Harvard Ph.D. and start seeing it for what it is — a process of communicating with patients in a way that addresses their needs.

### **Using Niche Marketing to Find the Right Patients**

To stay healthy, every professional practice needs a steady flow of new patients. One of the best ways to address this need is by identifying an under-served segment in your community and providing them with the services they want. This process of locating a desirable group of potential patients and targeting their specific needs is called “niche marketing.”

With niche marketing, you can play the market any way you want, targeting upscale, middle-of-the-road or budget-conscious clients. The secret to success involves zeroing in on one (and only one) of these segments with laser-beam precision so that you serve the specialized needs of that segment better than anyone else.

**Notes:**

**Notes:**

Another critical component of niche marketing involves consistency, making sure your practice looks the part. Is the scope of your services in line with the clientele that you'd like to attract? Does the look, feel and "personality" of your practice match the segment you are trying to serve? Most important, does your customer service meet the expectations of your selected niche?

Starbucks provides a shining example of niche marketing at its best. Ten years ago, who would have thought people would stand in line to pay \$3 for a cup of coffee? Nevertheless, Starbucks identified a group of people willing to pay a premium for quality products and nice looking stores, and they put their strategy to the test. Obviously, Starbucks doesn't provide dental services, but the fundamental principles remain the same. Starbucks succeeded by targeting the right prospects (upscale consumers) and making sure the product, the staff and the ambience created a winning "business personality" that their customers couldn't resist.

In the field of dentistry, BriteSmile has achieved rapid growth by employing a similar strategy. By studying their target market, they realized that there are plenty of people seeking top-of-the-line teeth whitening services. More important, BriteSmile determined that those people are willing to pay a premium for quick results, convenience and ambience. You might argue with BriteSmile's positioning strategy, but from a strictly marketing perspective, you can't argue with their success. They have created a clear and compelling perception in the minds of their consumers/patients about what they have to offer. As a result, their cash registers are ringing off the wall.

To stand out from the crowd, you don't have to master every dental service under the sun. In fact, you only have to be better than everyone else in *one* aspect. That advantage might come through innovation, overall quality, pricing, customer service, a unique case presentation technique or any number of things. But whatever differentiator you choose, your market must know that you do it better than anyone else.

How do you identify a niche market to pursue? Start with your own charts. Look at them from a different perspective to create a profile of the kind of patients you'd like to receive more often. Are they young professionals with disposable income, families with basic dental coverage, or older folks with more sophisticated tastes and desires?

In the long run, attempting to serve multiple groups of clients at the same time dilutes your marketing efforts and limits the growth of your practice. Instead, take dead aim on *one* target market, adjust your performance to meet the specific needs of that niche and serve that niche better than anyone else.

## Attracting “Motivated” Patients

In the dental industry, the real profits are made in the high-margin elective procedures. Cleaning and x-rays may pay the bills, but elective procedures bring in the money that goes into your pocket. In fact, depending on the procedure, as much as 80 percent of the fees from elective procedures goes directly to your bottom line. Part of your niche marketing strategy, therefore, should focus on attracting a steady flow of “motivated” patients.

By “motivated,” we mean patients who:

- Are willing to listen to a professional case presentation.
- Have more disposable income than the average patient.
- Might be interested in some elective services.

Attracting these kinds of patients requires properly positioning your services through a comprehensive yet focused marketing program that uses a variety of communications tools. These include:

- **Direct mail.** A well-written, professionally packaged direct mail piece educates the public about your services and creates a positive image in their minds about your practice.
- **Radio.** It is an outstanding medium, and, inexplicably, underutilized by dental professionals. Radio can work very effectively for dental practices. A wise alternative for dentists who like advertising.
- **Print.** Conservative option for some professionals who rather have a low-key approach to advertising.
- **Internet.** A good Web site allows you to provide up-to-date information about your services, interact with prospective patients and help them make the right decisions for their dental service needs.
- **Seminars.** Elective procedures often require a certain amount of education before patients will make a buying decision. Offering free seminars allows you to inform potential patients about the benefits of your services. It also positions you as an expert in your community.
- **Public relations writing.** Writing guest articles for local newspapers and magazines can also establish you as trusted source of information concerning dental practices.

Notes:

We'll talk a lot more about positioning your dental practice and the tools for doing so in the next few sections of this booklet. For now, it's important to know that you don't grow a successful dental practice by trying to be all things to all people. Of course, you need to provide a full range of dental services. But the most successful practices tend to focus on one or two highly targeted niche markets.

### **Women: The Untapped Market**

In the field of dental marketing, women represent one of the largest niche markets. Yet, for the most part, this market remains relatively untapped. According to the Society for Women's Health Research, a nonprofit foundation based in Washington, D.C., women make seventy-five percent of all the health care provider decisions in American families. Which means that if you're marketing your dental practice primarily to males, you may be missing three-fourths of your audience.

The female niche market illustrates why it's so important to craft your marketing conversation to your specific market.

- **Women make decisions differently than men.** In general, men make decisions based on logical, linear thinking. They want the facts and nothing but the facts. In contrast, women put a lot more emphasis on feelings and emotions. They want to know that the experience of coming to you for their dental needs will be a pleasant and rewarding one.
- **Women are in a hurry.** Today's women lead multiple roles, including wife, mother and businessperson. To reach busy women, your marketing materials should be straightforward and to the point, yet provide a sense of relaxation, simplicity and personal care.
- **Women are more relationship-oriented than men.** Women don't care that your new titanium head tooth polisher (with rotating speed of 5,000 rpm) will clean their teeth faster than ever. Instead, they want to know that your receptionist will greet them warmly and by name, that you will treat their children with kid-glove care, and that you will take the time to make them feel relaxed and at ease in the dentist's chair.
- **Women value harmony and visual design.** In general, women pay more attention to the look and feel of your marketing materials than men. That doesn't mean you can ignore the content. However your marketing materials should be visually attractive, provide a sense of harmony, and offer a careful balance between information and design.

**Notes:**

- **Women want to feel like part of a community.** Men tend to view going to the dentist as a series of one-time events. Women see it as ongoing relationship with you and your practice. Therefore, your marketing message needs to create a sense of community by reinforcing the key benefits for the patient. For women, that means trust, comfort and respect for the patient.

Research also shows that women tend to refer more people by word of mouth. If they feel like a part of your dental practice community, they will be more likely to recommend you when friends are looking for a dentist. In particular, pay attention to this critical aspect of community when marketing through your Web site.

A good way to learn more about these kinds of issues is by visiting successful Web sites that market specifically to women. You can learn a lot about key design and content elements from sites like [www.Oprah.com](http://www.Oprah.com) and [www.oxygen.com](http://www.oxygen.com). You can also pick up plenty of good ideas for how to interact with women on your site to create a sense of community.

Of course, women don't represent the only niche market. Others include seniors, people seeking cosmetic improvements to their teeth, children, families who have just moved to town and are looking for a good dentist — you can easily add to the list. The key with niche marketing is to identify the niche, focus in on the specific needs of those particular dental patients, and find a way to differentiate how you fulfill those needs from the other dentists in your area.

Notes:

## CORE MARKETING MESSAGE

### Positioning: The Foundation of Effective Marketing

Marketing experts define “positioning” as the art and science of creating the desired image of your business in the minds of customers and prospective customers. In fact, determining the right position for your business and then communicating that position to your target audience lays the foundation for all other marketing activities. If you fail in this critical step, you won’t be able to deliver a consistent, compelling marketing message, regardless of how big your budget or how many marketing tools you use.

The first step in positioning any dental practice involves identifying your dental practice “personality” and who you intend to target as a patient. Once you have clarity around these essential elements, the next step involves crafting a clear, concise, compelling marketing message that answers four critical (in the mind of the consumer) questions:

- Who do you work with?
- What type of dental problems do you solve?
- What solutions to these problems do you offer?
- What are the benefits of choosing you over your competitors?

In essence, your answer to these questions defines the position you want to occupy in the minds of your target market. The message you derive from your positioning describes what makes you special, distinctive and different from your competitors.

How do you craft such a message? Start by clearly communicating a problem your prospective patient has and demonstrating that you offer a solution. This “problem/solution” framework forms the core of all effective marketing messages. Without it, prospective patients have no reason to pay attention.

Next, create your dental practice personality, using the “TFS” technique:

- **Target.** Choose one specific element of your practice that appeals to your target audience.
- **Focus.** Make that element the focal point of your message,

again using a problem/solution framework.

- **Solution.** Present a very specific solution in terms of how it benefits your patients.

When creating your message, avoid overused labels such as “family dentistry,” “general dentist,” or “cosmetic dentistry.” Those tend to lump you in with every other dentist on the block. Instead, find a distinctive label such as “The Best Smile Showroom” or “The Smile Makers” that reflects and promotes your practice’s personality. Don’t try to appeal to every person on the planet; otherwise, you water down your marketing message and prevent any sense of personality from coming through.

Keep in mind that people tend to remember just one concept or claim from any given advertising/marketing message. By focusing on one perceived problem at a time (and your unique solution), you stand a much better chance of positioning your practice as #1 in the minds of your target audience.

For more information on how to position a professional services firm, we highly recommend the book, “The New Positioning,” by Jack Trout.

### **Selecting the Right Name for Your Practice**

As the field of dentistry becomes more crowded and competitive, it get harder and harder to stand out from the crowd. More than ever it pays to have a name that sets you apart from your competitors and sends a clear, distinct message about who you are, what you do, and how you differ from the other dental practices in your area.

An effective name also projects a distinguishing benefit to potential patients and positions you as the dental provider of choice. Granted, that’s asking a lot of a name. But if you don’t want prospective patients to lump you in with all the other dentists in your area, you have to give them something to remember you by. When choosing a name for your practice, keep the following in mind:

- Pick a name that conveys a positive image and a good feeling to your patients.
- Keep the name short, distinctive and memorable; something that causes you to stand out from the crowd.

**Notes:**

- Avoid using just your name and initials, especially if you have a common last name. “D. G. Smith Dentistry,” for example, conveys nothing about your marketing identity or the unique features of your practice.
- Strive for congruency and consistency between your name and the type of dental services you offer. For example, don’t try to appeal to the upscale patient if your office isn’t designed to offer the premium services those type of patients require.
- Don’t settle for generic names like “Family Dentistry” or “ABC Dental Group.” They come across as bland and lacking in emotional appeal.
- Stay away from location-based names, such as “Oxnard Dental Group” or “East County Dentistry.” Location-based names represent the #1 culprit in losing patients to other practices, especially in large geographic areas that are likely to have several practices with similar names.
- Never use cutesy, flashy or pretentious names that may mislead patients about the nature and identity of your practice.
- Try to have your name answer the key marketing question: Why should I select you as my dentist?

**Notes:**

One of the best names to appear on the dental scene in the past few years is “BriteSmile,” a rapidly growing chain of dental offices that specializes in upscale cosmetic dentistry. BriteSmile is simple and easy to remember. It conveys a positive, upbeat message, and it clearly indicates the focus and identity of the practice. Above all, it speaks directly to its target audience — people with higher than average disposable income who want to look their best.

For established practices, it may not be prudent or feasible to change your name. In those situations, consider adding a tagline to make your name more distinctive and memorable. For example: J. T. Williams Dentistry: The “One-Stop Smile Shop.” Or, suppose you wanted to target the young child market. You might add on a tagline like: Jones & Smith Dental Practice: The “Kid-Friendly” Dentists. Whatever tagline you come up with, be sure to include it with all your marketing materials, so that it becomes synonymous with your practice name.

With or without a tagline, don’t beat around the bush with your name. If your objective is to position your dental practice as a place for beau-

tiful smiles and easy payments, say it! Don't worry about whether or not your competitors also offer outside financing. Take the lead in promoting that added convenience and communicate that distinctive position in your name. By doing so you will make an immediate impact with prospective new patients. More important, you will set your self apart from competitors — even those who offer the same services.

In today's increasingly competitive markets, a distinctive name provides an important tool for catching the attention of prospective patients. Once you have their attention, then you can use other marketing tools to help position your practice and gain top of mind awareness with your target market.

### **Get Off the Generic Shelf**

Many dentists try to define a position for their practices by promoting the latest dental fad or trend. For example, they see other practices advertising whitening, veneers or other trendy cosmetic procedures and they follow the same path, thinking that "if it works for them it ought to work for me." Worse, they then try to compete on price by advertising a lower fee. This approach has three major flaws:

- Someone can always charge less than you. As a professional service provider, the last thing you want to do is get into a price war.
- Advertising on price adds no personality to the message. If your message isn't memorable, people won't remember it.
- This approach says, in essence, that "a dentist is a dentist is a dentist." It sends the message that people can (and should) shop dental procedures like any other commodity.

Worst of all, this approach puts you smack dab in the middle of the "generic" shelf with all the other competitors who also lack a brand positioning and a distinguishable practice personality. The solution? A distinctive marketing message that positions you as #1 in the minds of your target market.

Studies have shown that when businesses fail to hold the #1 position in the minds of their customers, their advertising and promotions can actually increase sales for the market leader. This doesn't mean that you have to be the biggest or even the best in your industry. What it does mean is that you must position your dental practice properly so

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that when prospective patients see your advertising, it doesn't make them think of your competitors.

An important goal for any business involves achieving what marketers call "top of mind awareness" with their customers and prospects. Top of mind means that when people think of your general product or service category, they think of you first. Top of mind awareness is especially critical for professional service firms because the buying cycle often takes a long time. Many people postpone or delay even the most basic of dental services. In addition, many elective patients like to conduct their own research before deciding to buy. Given these factors, how do you gain top of mind awareness? By identifying patient needs, building rapport and delivering a consistent message to your target market again and again.

### **Consistency: The Key to Success**

For nearly half a century, Allstate Insurance has promoted its insurance services with the same simple message: "You're in good hands with Allstate." Why have they stuck with the same slogan for so long? Because consistency works! Remember that the goal of marketing is not to win awards or show how clever and creative you are. The goal is to position your dental practice as #1 in the minds of your patients and prospective patients. The best way to do that is to create a compelling message and deliver it to your audience again and again and again.

To present a consistent marketing message:

- Have a plan. Lay out in advance what messages you will send, how you will send them (i.e., radio, direct mail, Internet), who you will send them to and how often.
- Make sure all your marketing materials have the same look and feel. More important, make sure they do not look like your competitors' marketing materials.
- Focus on one message at a time for each segment of your target audience. That message must address a perceived problem of your target audience and offer a solution. In addition, your solution must be seen as better than your competitors.
- Use repetition. Experts say it takes nine to 13 repetitions before people start to remember your message. Your marketing efforts, therefore, should include research in how to

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deliver your message the required number of times at the lowest cost.

- When you find something that works, stick with it. Don't change just for change's sake.

In today's world, people are bombarded with marketing and advertising messages from every angle. If your message doesn't show up regularly and often, it appears as a blip on your target audience's radar screen and then quickly disappears from sight. And in the battle for positioning, out of sight is out of mind. So stay focused, be consistent and follow through on the promise inherent in your marketing message.

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## CHAPTER 3

# GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

### Getting the Message Out

Once you have a strong message that appropriately positions your dental practice, the next step involves presenting it to your target audience in a timely and efficient manner. Although the Internet is becoming very popular as a marketing tool, the following traditional media continue to play an important role in marketing your dental practice:

- **Image**

You only get one chance to make a first impression. That old saying rings true for most businesses, but especially for a professional service like dentistry. The moment patients walk through the door, they begin to form lasting opinions about you and your practice. Once formed, those opinions can be very difficult to change. That's why having a warm, friendly but professional looking reception area is essential for building the right image in your patients' minds.

For most dental practices, however, that critical first impression begins to take shape long before the patient ever sets foot in your office. In fact, it starts the moment someone opens your direct mail letter, sees your print ad, or picks up your brochure and begins to read about you. If they don't like what they see, or if they get turned off by your message, you may never have another chance at catching their attention — and their business — again.

Your image gets communicated in many ways, from the pictures hanging on your office wall to the way you and your staff dress. In terms of your marketing materials, however, your image comes across through the following:

- Logos
- Letterhead
- Stationery
- Building signage
- Business cards
- Invoices/billing statement
- Web sites
- Advertising
- Newsletters

The look and feel of these individual marketing elements go a long way toward creating the impression that people get from your dental practice. The key with image is making sure that all of these elements visually support the positioning statement you want to make regarding your practice. Nowadays, there are many software programs on the market that allow you do design and print business cards, letterheads and other printed materials. Unless you have a innate talent for graphic design, however, you're better off hiring a graphic design specialist to create the look and feel you want for your marketing materials.

- **Brochures**

A well-written brochure can play an important role in helping to build your dental practice. It communicates important information to prospective patients and often is the first step in the process of helping people decide to buy your dental services. To create an effective brochure that conveys the message you want prospective patients to read, keep the following principles in mind:

1. **Understand the brochure's purpose.** The primary goal with a brochure is to get potential patients to take the next step in the buying process. So in addition to including your name, location, phone number and the services you provide, it also needs to motivate people to take action. For dental practices, that action typically involves a phone call to learn more about your services or to schedule an appointment.
2. **Offer benefits, not features.** To motivate people to take action, present benefits, not features. People already know that you clean teeth, fill cavities, treat gum disease and so on. Those activities represent the features of your business. The benefits include things like the prevention of cavities, the self-confidence that comes from a glowing smile or the ability to eat hot and cold foods without pain.
3. **Be concise.** In today's world, people are bombarded with unsolicited information. As a result, they won't take the time to read long-winded, poorly written marketing messages. To get and keep their attention with your brochure, get to the point fast. Use simple, easy-to-read language that provides educational, benefit-oriented information.
4. **Give people a reason to read beyond the headline.** Two brochures sit side by side. The first one says, "Arthur B. Smith

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Dentistry.” The second one says, “Five Good Reasons to Make Johnson & Jones *Your* Dentist of Choice.” Nine out of ten people will read the second brochure first. Why? Because it offers a promise of new and useful information. If you want people to read your brochure, give them a reason for doing so.

5. **Build trust.** At best, most people dislike going to the dentist. At worst, they fear it. To overcome that fear, your brochure needs to build trust. Include pictures of happy, smiling patients. List your credentials and years of experience. Highlight any awards you have received. Above all, let your patients know that you will treat them with kid-glove care.
6. **Include a call to action.** A good brochure always includes a call to action. It doesn’t have to be an aggressive sales pitch, just a friendly reminder to take the next step in the buying process. For example: “For the whitest, brightest smile, call 1-800-444-9999.” Or, “Let Dr. Jones make your next dental checkup your most pleasant ever. Call us today to schedule an appointment.”

Whether you write your own brochure or hire a pro, keep it simple, make it interesting to read, and do your best to answer the question that every patient asks: *Why should I choose you over every other dentist?*

- **Direct Mail**

Direct mail still represents one of the best and most-cost effective methods for marketing a small professional services firm. When properly planned and implemented, a direct mail campaign provides an effective method for reaching large numbers of people with your marketing message.

It all starts with finding the right mailing list. You can have the slickest, most professional-looking direct mail package in the world, but if you mail it to the wrong people, it won’t accomplish a thing. In fact, in the field of dental marketing, more direct mail campaigns fail because of poorly targeted mailing lists than for any other reason.

So before you spend that first dollar on the creative side, make sure you have identified the right audience and have a list that closely matches your target market.

How do you know whom to target? That depends on which of your dental services you want to promote. (A good direct mail campaign

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takes aim on one specific service; it doesn't attempt to tell people about everything you do.)

For example, suppose you want to build your cosmetic dentistry business. Start by writing down the names of your best cosmetic patients and listing the characteristics that make them good patients. The list will likely include things like good credit history and high levels of disposable income, as well as key demographics such as age, income and lifestyle issues. Upon analyzing these characteristics, you will start to notice trends. In this case, it's highly likely that a significant percentage of them will own their own homes. Your general target audience then becomes all the homeowners in your practice's geographic area.

Of course, you can always use additional criteria to restrict the list. For example, you might want to narrow it down to "two income homeowners making x amount of money, living within a specific zip code." In general, the more criteria you include, the more accurate your list will be.

### **Finding the Right List**

A second approach involves purchasing a high-quality mailing list from a reputable list broker. List brokers can be found in the Yellow Pages or by conducting a search on the Internet.

As you will discover, list brokers come in all shapes and sizes, so it pays to do some research before selecting one. Most brokers tend to specialize in certain types of lists, so you need to find one who offers lists appropriate for your specific criteria. Also, make sure your broker can respond to the unique needs of a small dental practice.

A good place to start is with Getko, which specializes in the new homeowners market. Their lists are distributed by just about every broker in the world. AccuLeads, at <http://www.acculeads.com/>, also offers good lists for dentists.

Another reputable list company, although a bit more expensive, is Experian (<http://www.listsabc.com/experian/>.) In addition to traditional mailing lists, they also offer "modeled" lists, which use computers to make educated guesses rather than compiling the information via traditional methods. For basic dental services, a modeled list of homeowners can offer a reasonable alternative.

Don't limit your search for good lists strictly to list brokers. Cosmetic dentistry tends to attract a younger, more sophisticated audience. You

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can also target those prospects through certain magazines and publications, clubs or associations. Another option is to exchange names with non-competitive local businesses who serve the same market.

If you decide to use the services of a list broker, keep the following points in mind:

- **Use reputable brokers.** Stick with brand names or referrals from trusted associates. When in doubt, ask for and check references carefully.
- **Rent, don't buy.** Most mailing lists are rented, primarily because they grow outdated so quickly (often within six months to a year). Plus, buying a list always costs more, and you don't know if you have a good list until you test it. Except in very rare cases, it always pays to rent rather than buy.

One word of caution: in most cases, the contract will specify how many times you can mail to the list. Be careful not to exceed your agreement because most list providers include decoy names to track how many times the list is used.

- **Double-check your list criteria.** Watch out for lists that appear to be the same. For example, one might think that "new homeowners" and "new movers" would contain the same names. However, "new movers" lists also include renters and apartment dwellers. If these fit within your target audience, fine. Otherwise, make sure the list accurately matches your defined criteria.
- **Test for accuracy.** To test the quality of your list, start slowly. Just because you rent 37,000 names doesn't mean you have to mail to all of them at once. Test a fraction and track the response. If you get a decent result, send out a larger mailing using the remaining names on the list.

Direct mail is like riding a train — you have to be on the right track to get where you want to go. Take the time to define your target market, make sure you get a good list and chances are you'll reach your marketing destination.

- **Newsletters**

Despite the emergence of Web sites, e-mail blasts and other new technologies, newsletters are still holding their own. With the right

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budget and a good creative team, the newsletter still represents an effective tool for maintaining ongoing relationships with patients and prospective patients.

Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to spend a fortune in order to produce a quality newsletter that hits home with your target audience. With a little forethought and creativity, you can create a high-quality newsletter that represents your dental practice in a very professional manner. A good newsletter can help you achieve a number of marketing objectives, including:

- Attract new patients
- Present more services to existing patients
- Present more high-margin services
- Protect and enhance the image and reputation of your practice
- Improve understanding of your service capabilities
- Follow up on new patients and inquiries

Accomplishing some or all of these goals starts with understanding a few basic principles that govern all newsletters:

- **Focus on the benefit to the reader.** In general, people read newsletters to gain information about you, your business and your products and services. But a good newsletter also:
  - Provides handy contact information
  - Identifies opportunities (i.e. new products or services, a new location, etc.)
  - Provides information and education about dental services in general
  - Help readers solve problems
  - Helps with the decision-making process regarding the purchase of dental services

When making decisions about what kind of content to place in your newsletter, keep these benefits in mind. If an article, story or announcement doesn't fit into one of these categories, chances are your audience won't read it.

- **Use technology to your advantage.** Sophisticated page layout and clip-art software has come way down in price. For a minimal investment, you can now design newsletters like the pros. One cautionary note: some clip-art tends to be a bit "cartoonish." If you use clip-art, make sure it is appropriate for the style and design of your newsletter as well as the image of

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your practice.

- **Write attention-grabbing headlines.** Avoid puns and cutesy word plays. Instead, fill your newsletters with powerful headlines that promise new information. Good headlines always tell your audience how they will benefit from reading the article. For example:
  - Ten Steps to Cleaner, Whiter Teeth
  - What Most Dentists *Don't* Tell You About Gum Disease
  - You *Can* Afford a Whiter Smile with Our Easy-Payment Plan
- **Understand the basics of graphic design.** Keep the design layout simple, yet tasteful, and appealing to the eye. Make sure the look and feel of the newsletter fit your image and your other marketing materials. When it comes specific page layout:
  - Use big, bold headlines.
  - Leave plenty of space in the margins and between columns.
  - Keep the type size legible. (If seniors make up a large part of your audience, consider a larger than normal font size.)
  - To break up long rows of text, use subheads, bullet points and icons. Wrap text around pictures and use call-outs (quotes taken from the article and set apart in larger print) to vary your columns and create visual appeal.
- **Use pictures appropriately.** When used by itself (with a single headline or caption) a picture should tell its own story. When used alongside an article, a picture should support the article. Before putting any picture in your newsletter, ask, "What story does this picture tell?"
- **Involve the reader.** Use surveys, quizzes, question and answer columns (ask readers to send in questions) to get people involved in the newsletter.
- **Write powerfully to connect with your audience.** Write vivid-

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ly and descriptively. Tell stories that your readers can identify with. Paint “word pictures” for readers to see. Avoid the over-use of medical or dental jargon.

- **Personalize your newsletter with a distinctive masthead, logo and name.** These make a powerful first impression and set the tone and direction for the entire newsletter. You only get one chance to make a first impression, so use the masthead to make a good one.
- **Incorporate ideas from other newsletters.** Study the newsletters you receive from a critical perspective. What about the design and layout appeals to you? What turns you off? What about the content sparks your interest? What puts you to sleep?

Put on your thinking cap, write for your audience (and not for yourself) and follow these basic principles. You’ll end up with a newsletter you can feel proud of and one your prospects and patients will look forward to receiving.

- **Broadcast Media**

When it comes to broadcast media — radio, television and cable TV — radio represents the best option for most dental practices. Regular broadcast television reaches a wide audience, but it costs a fortune. Cable TV offers more affordable prices, but you don’t know how many people you’re reaching. In most cases, a well-crafted radio spot yields a far better return on your marketing dollar than either broadcast or cable TV.

In addition, radio offers several advantages over other marketing media:

- **Personal touch.** People make buying decisions based on logic *and* emotion. Few things establish an emotional connection better than the sound of the human voice. Plus, radio delivers a much greater level of intimacy than either print media or TV. It allows you to make an instant emotional connection with the listener.
- **Extensive reach.** People tend to watch TV at home and at very specific times. In contrast, people listen to the radio practically everywhere: at home, at work, in the car, at play — even while exercising. Regardless of the situation, your audience

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hears the message loud and clear. With other media, people have a tendency to flip the channel, turn the page and tune out your message.

- **24/7 availability.** Radio is available anywhere, all the time.
- **Long “shelf life.”** People read the newspaper once and throw it away. They listen to the radio for hours at a time, especially at work and during long rush-hour commutes.
- **Local touch.** Radio stations help people to feel a part of their community by focusing on local news, events and commercials. Radio spots tap into that sense of community.
- **Flexibility.** Once you mail out an expensive direct mail piece, the die is cast. With radio spots, however, you can make changes to the ads, frequency or stations quickly and at very little cost.

In addition to these benefits, some dentists use radio to test a new name for their practice that might have broader appeal. For example, instead of advertising yourself as “Dr. Johnson Dental Offices,” you might try to establish more of a brand identity with “The Whiter Smile Clinic” or something of that nature. Because of its flexibility, radio makes it easy to respond and adapt to the feedback you get from the ads.

### Making Radio Work for You

Clearly, radio has vast potential as a dental marketing tool. But like any tool, it needs to be used properly. To create an effective radio spot:

- **Use a professional copywriter.** One limitation of radio ads is their brevity – usually 30 to 60 seconds. An experienced copywriter will help you say exactly what you need to say and nothing more, and will do it in a manner that captures the listener’s attention.
- **Focus, focus, focus.** Don’t try to cram too much information into your spot because that confuses the listener. Instead, focus on solving one problem of major interest to your target audience.
- **Include contact information.** Once you grab their interest, people need to know how to contact you. Repeat your phone

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number and location at least twice. If your ad runs 60 seconds, mention them again at the end of the spot.

- **Make your ad dignified and professional.** Used car lots, fast food restaurants and other businesses can get away with loud, zany and unorthodox radio spots. People do not want or expect to hear offbeat advertising from dentists.

For newcomers to the world of radio advertising, it pays to use a professional marketer with experience in the industry. This person will help you create your radio spots, decide when and where to run them, and assist you in buying advertising time at the best price. Radio station sales reps often offer these services for free, but remember that you get what you pay for. Plus, their primary goal is to sell advertising, not build your dental practice.

If your budget doesn't permit hiring a pro, or you insist on doing it yourself, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Have a strong opening.** If you don't capture the listener's attention within the first seven seconds of the radio ad, your entire commercial is wasted. Grab the listener with an opening line that focuses on solving a specific problem.
- **Tell them who you are.** Mention your name and contact information at least two or three times in a 60-second spot.
- **Go for frequency.** Research shows that people have to hear a message seven to nine times for it to stick in their memory. Short, concise spots repeated many times work better than longer, less frequent spots.
- **Choose your spots carefully.** Select times when your target audience is most likely to be listening. Also, be sure to choose appropriate radio stations for your audience. If you're targeting seniors, for example, don't place your spots on the local hip-hop or grunge rock stations.
- **Target your audience.** Radio makes it easy to connect with a specific audience. For example, if you want to reach out to mothers (a good idea since they make the majority of dental decisions in American families) you can advertise on radio stations that have strong appeal for female listeners in the 18-to-49 age group. Usually this format is called "adult contemporary" or "soft hits." Due to the strong demand for this type

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of audience, you will typically find two or three stations competing for this segment in any given market.

- **Spend your dollars wisely.** Before advertising on any radio station, ask for their ratings and/or number of listeners. The top stations will gladly share this information with you. (Less successful stations may try to convince you that ratings don't matter. Don't listen because ratings make a *big* difference.) After identifying the stations with the best ratings, ask for their advertising rates for the morning and afternoon drive shows. Then do the math to determine which station offers most cost-effective radio spots.

The name of the game in radio is simplicity. Whether you use a pro or do it yourself, keep it short, stick to one major benefit for your target audience, and put your message out there often enough so people remember it.

- **Print Advertising: Newspapers, Magazines**

The secret to effective advertising lies in understanding that advertising and marketing are *not* the same. Whereas marketing tries to establish an ongoing (two-way) dialog between you and your target market, advertising involves a one-way communication that delivers a very specific message in a specific medium, usually through newspapers or magazines. Marketing tries to position your dental practice in the minds of patients and prospective patients; advertising tries to get the customer to buy.

Successful advertising for a dental practice requires two basic skills:

- The ability to create compelling ads that motivate the customer to take action.
- Knowing where to place your ads to maximum effect.

If your budget permits, use a professional copywriter to create your ads. A good copywriter will more than pay for his or her fee by creating an ad that generates a strong response. If you decide to create your own print ads, keep the following in mind:

- **Start with an attention-grabbing headline.** Because people tend to scan print ads, strong headlines that stop the eye and grab the reader's attention are a must. Good headlines typically promise some important benefit to the reader.

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- **Use the body of the ad to support the headline.** Tell a story that supports the benefit promised in the headline.
- **Always include a call to action.** The main purpose of an ad is to motivate people to do something. In this case it could be to call for an appointment, send off for a brochure or visit your Web site. Know what action you want readers to take and ask them to take it.
- **Don't try to tell the whole story in one ad.** One of the first rules of advertising is to say one thing and say it well. When you try to communicate everything you do in one ad, readers have a hard time figuring out who you are (as a dental practice) and what you do. Stick to one dental service per ad and sell the benefits (not the features) of that service.
- **Don't offer discounts or "freebies."** Offering free services or deep discounts may seem like a good way to get people in the door. However, research has shown that this approach doesn't work for two reasons. First, it tends to attract patients who jump from one provider to the next in an endless search for the cheapest price. You may entice enough bargain hunters through the door to pay for the cost of the ad, but you can't build a healthy practice with those kinds of patients. Second, offering freebies tarnishes your professional image. "Buy one, get one free" may work in the retail world, but you won't get very far by trying to become the "One-Dollar Store" of dentists.
- **Never copy a competitor's ad.** A common mistake among dental practitioners involves thinking, "That ad is working for my competitor, so it ought to work for me." While it never hurts to study a good ad to understand the elements that make it work (i.e., good headline, crisp copy, etc.), the last thing you want to do is mimic your competitor, especially if the competitor has been using the ad for a long period of time. By doing so, you may end up driving more business through their door than yours. Instead, use your creativity and enthusiasm to create your own unique and highly personalized image.
- **Don't limit your ads to "commodity" services.** Most dentists offer the same services: cleaning, whitening, restoration and repair, etc. With everyone offering the same commodities, what's the difference between you and your competitors?

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More important, how can your target audience make that distinction?

The difference (“differentiator” in marketing terms) is that every dental practice has its own look, feel and personality. To stand out from your competitors, *that’s* what you need to promote. Stop looking for a new angle on how to promote your whitening services and start focusing on how to convey your unique practice personality. Remember that people buy “you” first and the services you offer second.

When deciding where to place your print ads, pay close attention to your local market conditions. Study the demographics of your particular market and pay attention to what your patients and potential patients do. Where do they live? What do they read? How much discretionary income do they have? What are their hobbies and leisure activities? What are their buying patterns? The answers to these questions will tell you which print media offer the best alternatives for your marketing dollars.

Finally, always test for results. They say that the key to success in real estate is “location, location, location.” In advertising, it’s “test, test, test.” Experiment with various ads by changing one element (i.e., headline, media or frequency) at a time. Track the responses of each test and adjust your ads accordingly. Yes, it takes a little more time and effort, but you’ll get a lot more out of your advertising dollars by taking an organized, disciplined approach and comparing results on a consistent basis.

- **Yellow Pages Ads**

Statistics show that two-thirds of U.S. dentists use Yellow Pages advertising to market their practices. But in many cases, those same dentists are tossing their hard-earned dollars down the drain. Why? Because Yellow Pages ads rarely produce a good return on investment. In fact, they come with a number of built-in limitations that reduce the effectiveness of your advertising dollar and restrict your ability to reach new patients.

These limitations include:

- **High cost.** Depending on its size and location, a Yellow Pages ad can cost up to \$20,000 per year. And you can easily spend another \$5,000 designing a customized ad. At those rates, it takes a lot of patients just to break even on the cost of the ad. Plus, studies show that the phone directory companies

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continue to raise their fees far beyond current inflation rates.

- **Cluttered media.** You spend a lot of money to design and place your ad, and where do you end up? Depending on the size of your market, right next to dozens, perhaps even hundreds of dentists all competing for *your* next patient.
- **Lack of flexibility.** In today's mass-media world, it takes a variety of messages to reach your audience and motivate them to contact you. Yet, once your Yellow Pages ad goes into the directory, you can't make any changes for a full 12 months.
- **Difficult to test.** Because of their inflexibility, Yellow Pages ads don't allow you to test different marketing approaches. Once you place an ad, you have to wait a year to test a new headline or message. And unless a patient says they found you through the phone directory, you have no way of knowing the effectiveness of your ad.
- **Reach the wrong market.** Yellow Pages ads tend to attract emergency patients and telephone shoppers. While these patients can augment your regular clientele, they're *not* the kind of customers upon which you can build a healthy, growing practice.

Does this mean that you should never use Yellow Pages ads? Not necessarily. A well-designed Yellow Pages ad can still have a place as one part of a comprehensive dental practice marketing program. However, do not invest huge amounts of money in an Yellow Pages ad, and never rely on one as your only marketing tool. With such a strategy, the chances of your dental practice reaching its full potential are slim to none.

### Selecting the Appropriate Marketing Media

How do you know which of these marketing tools to use? That depends on three primary factors:

- Your marketing goals and objectives
- The size of your budget
- Your target audience

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Of these, probably the most important is your target audience. Where do they live? What do they read, watch and listen to? Where do they shop? What are their leisure activities? What kinds of marketing messages do they respond to? The answers to these kinds of questions will tell you which tools to include in your marketing toolbox. The best marketing plans incorporate a variety of communications tools to deliver the positioning message. However, a careful analysis of your target market will tell you which tools should get the lion's share of your marketing budget.

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## CHAPTER 4

# INTERNET MARKETING

### Internet Marketing

The Internet has revolutionized the way businesses of all sizes and shapes market their products and services, and dental practices are no exception. If you're not taking advantage of this powerful medium, you're missing a great chance to grow your dental practice in a very cost-effective manner. It all starts, of course, with having your own Web site to connect with the rapidly growing segment of the population that conducts research and buys products and services online.

A well-designed Web site offers a number of advantages. Specifically, it allows you to:

- Provide timely and relevant information about yourself and your dental products and services to your target market. More important, unlike traditional marketing media, it allows you to update and change the information at virtually no cost.
- Interact with patients and prospective patients at the click of a mouse or button.
- Position your dental practice as #1 in the minds of your target market.
- Generate patient traffic and help you grow your business.

At the same time, the Internet carries a certain amount of risk because it differs from traditional marketing media in many ways. Unless you know what you're doing, you can spend a lot of time and money and get little or nothing in return.

### Design Principles

The two basic elements of a good Web site are design and content. Design has to do with the look, feel and interactivity of the site; content consists of the information and the way you present it on the site. Do both of these elements right and you will have a great Web site.

When designing your Web site, keep the following principles in mind:

- **Have very clear goals and objectives for your site.** Decide what you want the site to accomplish and how you will use it to interact with your clients.
- **Match your site to your target market.** For example, if seniors make up a large portion of your market, keep your site as simple as possible and avoid the use of trendy jargon. If you want to attract a younger crowd, consider using flashier graphics, splashy colors and “hip” language.
- **Make a good first impression.** You have about 10 to 15 seconds to grab the visitor’s attention on your Web site. Your first page should:
  - Load quickly (not too many graphics)
  - Be well-designed and visually appealing
  - Make it easy for visitors to find what they want on your site

If people like what they see, you have a chance to develop a relationship with them through your site. If not, they will click somewhere else and probably never return.

- **Avoid “hard sell” tactics.** Sophisticated Web users shun aggressive and/or deceptive marketing tactics. Instead, provide value to your visitors through factual, well-written information that creates a positive impression about you and your practice. Make it worth their while to visit so that they decide to continue the relationship with you.
- **Avoid clutter.** Don’t try to cram too much onto one page, especially your home page. A good Web site is like a good smile — clean, neat and pleasing to the eye.
- **Be consistent with your own personality.** A web site should reflect your personality as a dental professional, your specialty (if any), and the look and feel of your practice as a whole. Don’t try to be somebody you’re not.
- **Use appropriate page names.** Every page on your site needs to have a name that clearly relates to your practice. Otherwise, when people bookmark the page and come back a week or two later, they won’t remember that it applies to you.
- **Don’t go overboard on the graphics.** Large pictures and

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fancy graphics cause the page to load slowly. Unless your target market uses the latest high-speed modems, you may turn people away because they don't want to wait for the pages to load.

- **Understand the medium.** The Internet is a subtle marketing medium. You don't have to shout to get people's attention as you do with magazine ads or radio spots. Write simple, straightforward copy that clearly conveys the benefits of your practice.

Keep in mind that people who use the Web tend to be more sophisticated and make more money than your average patient. Plus, they have already expressed an interest by choosing to visit your Web site. To appeal to their level of sophistication, design a stylish, professional-looking Web site, respect their time online by providing useful information and make it easy for them to find that information. Follow these principles and your Web site should attract the kinds of patients that enable you to build a healthy, growing practice.

### Creating Effective Web Content

Design and content both play a critical role in achieving your Internet marketing goals. However, the content is where the rubber meets the road. Design attracts the visitor's attention and encourages the eye to linger on the page, but it's the content that delivers your message and connects with your target audience. Given this premise, the million-dollar question is, "What constitutes quality content and how do you create it?"

The first rule of Internet marketing says that the content must add value to the visitor, not the owner of the Web site. So before putting any content on your site, ask, "Will this information provide real value to my patients or prospective patients?" If not, don't put it on the site. Second, recognize that good content does far more than just educate visitors about your products and services. It also:

- **Provides information.** In addition to explaining your products and services, a Web site can also list your location(s), hours of operation, payment options, contact information and much more.
- **Develops the relationship.** Increasingly, Web sites represent the first contact that prospects have with your business. In that respect, the site plays a major role in initiating and

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developing the relationship between you and your patients. Good content will start the relationship off on the right foot.

- **Builds trust.** Good content strengthens existing relationships by building trust and enhancing your credibility. Be sure to include your professional credentials, years of experience, customer testimonials and anything else that builds trust on your site.
- **Motivates visitors to take action.** Remember that your Web site is a *marketing* tool. That means it should help move prospects through the buying process to the point where they are ready to buy or at least contact you to get more information so they can make the buying decision.

In addition to high-quality content, you also need to make it easy for people to navigate through the site and find the information they want. More than anything, the Internet is about speed. If people can't find what they want in a very short time frame, they will click over to a competitor's site. For that reason, the best Web sites anticipate where visitors are most likely to go and lead them through the content using the following tools:

- **Headlines.** Every Web page needs a headline that tells the reader what they will find on that particular page. Ideally, the headline should also describe the benefit visitors will receive from reading the page.
- **Subheads.** These are used to break up large blocks of texts and make them easier to read. When set up as links, subheads also allow readers to jump down to other sections of an article without having to scroll. Plus, subheads make it easy for people to catch the main points of an article without having to read every word.
- **Link text.** Link text allows the reader to jump to a related article or piece of content with one click of the mouse. Link text is usually highlighted in bold or a different color.
- **Navigation bar.** This lets visitors know where they are at all times on your site. The navigation bar is especially important for sites with many different pages. If visitors get lost, they are likely to get frustrated and click away to a site that is easier to navigate.

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### When creating your content:

- Write crisply. Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Put the most important and attractive information in the foreground.
- Know what information your visitors are looking for and make it easy for them to find it. (Remember, the competition is one click away from your site!)
- Use animations (i.e., blinking text, moving banners) only if they convey real information about the most important idea on a page. Otherwise, they distract the eye and confuse the reader.
- Put your contact information on every page. Nothing frustrates visitors more than having to jump from page to page to find your phone number or address.

Above all, when producing and formatting content, remember to think like a visitor to your site, *not* like a dentist!

To learn more about how to create quality online content, check out the following Web sites:

- [www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/](http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/) provides information on how users read on the Web and how authors should write their Web pages.
- [www.webreference.com/content/writing](http://www.webreference.com/content/writing) offers quick and easy tips for non-writers.
- [www.gahran.com/](http://www.gahran.com/) This site represents what a professional services Web site should look like — simple, yet sophisticated; targeted material; plenty of opportunity to interact with the audience.

### Getting People to Your Site

Building a great Web site is only half the battle. You still have to get people to visit it or all your hard work will go for naught. If you have a well-designed Web site but aren't getting many hits, perhaps it's time to revisit your strategy for directing people to your site. For small pro-

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professional service firms, two strategies tend to work best: creative PR and effective use of search engines.

Promoting your Web site doesn't have to take a lot of time or cost a lot of money. It does involve two of the small business marketer's best tools: creativity and persistence. When using PR to promote your site:

- Put your URL (Web address) on your business card, brochures, direct mailings, flyers, billing statements and every piece of printed material that leaves your office.
- Include your Web address in any and all print, radio and TV advertising.
- Contact local newspapers or trade publications whose readership might have an interest in your Web site. Editors are often hungry for reports on new and interesting Web sites.
- Include information about your Web site on your telephone on-hold recording message and after-hours voice answering machine.

These are just some of the low-cost ways to let people know about your Web site. You and your staff can probably come up with many more. When it comes to promoting your Web site, a little brain power and initiative will go a long way.

### How to Use Search Engines

There are many search engines on the Web, most of which specialize in finding certain types of sites. To find the handful that will work best for your dental practice:

- **Target the large directories first.** The giant directories like Yahoo and Open Directory are by far the largest traffic generators on the Web. Using keywords that apply to your Web pages, search these and other large directories to see which Web sites come up first. Then contact the search engine to find out how much it would cost to put your dental practice in that position.
- **Consider "pay for performance" search engines.** Some search engines charge by the click rather than a flat fee. These can also generate good results for small professional firms, especially at the beginning of your marketing campaign when

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you haven't yet obtained a listing on many search engines.

- **Don't overlook the specialized directories.** Smaller, more specialized directories like About.com are increasing in popularity because they can deliver highly targeted traffic. For small businesses and professional practices, the smaller directories often offer the biggest bang for the Internet marketing buck.

Overture.com is a specialized search engine that caters to small businesses with minimal marketing budgets. It enables you to reach targeted audiences in clearly-defined geographic markets at a minimal cost. Overture.com works by allowing you to select your own search terms and determine what to pay on a per-click basis for each term. The higher you "bid," the higher in the search results your site appears. The net result is that you get targeted advertising at a price you can afford.

For example, suppose you want to know how many people in the Phoenix market searched for dentists using terms like "Phoenix dentist," "Dentist Phoenix" or "Dentist in Phoenix." Overture.com will not only tell you how many people searched the site using those terms, it will also indicate how much it would cost to get a #1 ranking with each of those search criteria. In a few easy steps, you can determine which criteria work best in your market and how much you need to pay in order to go to the head of the class. Depending on your market and the number of searches conducted each month, you can often achieve the #1 ranking for mere pennies per click. In addition, once you attain a top position on Overture.com searches, you automatically get a top listing on Yahoo, MSN, Altavista and Lycos, without costing you a penny more!

Currently, the cost at Overture.com for a #1 position as Phoenix dentist is a mere nine cents per click. That means you can attract 277 visitors to your site for the initial \$25 dollars it takes to open the account. And you get the collateral effect with the other search engines for free. Obviously, the per click costs will vary from city to city. But you still end up with effective, highly targeted marketing for far less than money than you would spend with the major search engines. And remember — you end up on Yahoo, MSN, Altavista and Lycos for free.

You can take out banner ads on Yahoo or hire a specialized consultant to get you near the top of Altavista, but it will likely cost you an arm and a leg. Instead, save yourself some time and money by checking out Overture.com.

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## Staying Focused on the Goal

Keep in mind that you don't want the entire world to visit your site — just those who fit your target market and have a legitimate need for your dental products and services. As more and more people use the Internet to conduct research on buying decisions, an increasing number of people will be searching for what you have to offer. Make it easy for them to find you and watch your number of legitimate inquiries soar.

To learn more about marketing via the Internet, we highly recommend the following sites:

- [www.wilsonweb.com](http://www.wilsonweb.com). For professional service firms who want to market their products and services via the Internet, this comprehensive Web site offers a wide variety of ideas, information and links to other valuable resources.
- <http://searchengineforums.com>. To find out what other professionals are doing to maximize their search engine results, surf on over to this page for a number of different forum discussions on search engine-related topics.

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## CHAPTER 5

# DATABASE MARKETING

### The Power of Database Marketing

Studies show that up to 45 percent of the patients who walk through your door will purchase dental services within the following year. The question is, will they purchase those services from you or another dentist? The answer lies in how well you follow up with those prospective patients.

Experienced dentists know that effective follow-up represents the cornerstone of a vital dental practice. Yet too many dentists are still using stone-age tools in a microchip world. Research shows that it takes a minimum of seven to nine contacts before a patient decides to do business with you. So traditional marketing tools such as mailing lists and the occasional phone call no longer get the job done. Bringing large numbers of potential patients into the fold requires a *database marketing system*, one with robust contact management capabilities that allow you to deliver your message to your target market without a lot of fuss and bother.

What is database marketing? Contrary to popular belief, it's not just an automated mailing list. Much broader in scope, database marketing involves an organized system of information management that allows you to communicate with current and prospective on an ongoing basis and in a variety of ways. When properly utilized, database marketing allows you to:

- Separate patients into different categories (i.e., frequent user, occasional user, one-time user) and market to them appropriately.
- Send personalized, customized marketing communications to different segments of your target market.
- Retain current patients and motivate them to come in for treatment on a more frequent basis.
- Attract new patients by explaining how your dental practice fits their unique dental needs.
- Grow your practice in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Ideally, database marketing should be used as part of a comprehensive marketing program. However, when faced with a restricted budget, database marketing can enable you to grow your dental practice without using any other form of promotion or advertising. In either case, you must establish a good database marketing system and use it properly. By doing so, you can achieve significant improvements in net revenues with a small change in responses.

For example, suppose you currently get three positive responses out of every 10 contacts to your target market. Using database marketing to increase that to four out of 10 (a 33 percent increase by adding only one more response) could have a tremendous impact on the profitability of your practice.

### Getting the Right System

To get the most from your database marketing efforts, three fundamental elements must be in place:

1. **The right software program.** The whole point of database marketing is to harness the power of technology to leverage your marketing efforts. That starts with having the right software for your dental marketing needs.
2. **Good data.** A database marketing system is only as good as the data you feed into it. Make sure you have up-to-date information on all your patients and use only high-quality mailing lists when contacting prospective patients.
3. **Commitment to the program.** Database marketing involves an ongoing process, not a one-time event. If you don't intend to use it on a consistent basis, don't bother using it at all.

At the heart of every good database marketing program lies a powerful contact management software program. Why? Because you can't afford to spend half your day on marketing activities. A good contact management program dramatically reduces the time it takes to send customized marketing messages to patients and prospects. This helps to build your practice and frees you up to focus on what you do best — caring for your patients

Specifically, a good contact management program allows you to:

- Generate targeted lists of patients and prospective patients.

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- Set up an organized system of follow-up contacts.
- Send the right letters to the right patients at the right time, based on *your* criteria, not the software's.
- Easily and effectively incorporate a variety of customized letters, scripts for phone calls and other types of contacts.
- Reduce the time it takes to contact patients while significantly increasing their response rate.

Most dental practices already have some form of computerized system. However, don't make the mistake of thinking you don't need a contact management program because you already have a dental software program. Most dental software programs focus primarily on the billing process. And while some offer a few basic mailing list features, they tend to have very limited capabilities when it comes to contact management. Of course, you have to collect on your accounts receivables. You couldn't stay in business very long if you didn't. But collecting receivables involves a separate activity that has nothing to do with the marketing function.

If you already have a dental software program, start by exploring all the database marketing options it offers. You may be surprised to find a number of useful features that you have not been utilizing. If, however, you discover that your dental management system is designed mostly for billing purposes, you have two basic options:

1. Replace your existing billing program with one that offers a variety of database marketing features.
2. Purchase a separate database marketing program.

We recommend option #2, for several reasons. First, you and your staff will have to learn how to use the new database marketing software. You don't want to have to learn new billing software at the same time. Second, you can buy very powerful contact management software for a few hundred dollars. Therefore, it doesn't make sense to throw out your perfectly good billing software and invest in a larger, more expensive program.

One of the best contact management software programs for small businesses is called "ACT!" It's easy to use, offers a wide range of options, and generally costs less than \$200. For an additional \$80, it comes with an option that allows you to use Microsoft Outlook e-mail from inside

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the program itself. So for less than \$300, you can arm yourself with a powerful contact management system that opens up a whole new world of marketing possibilities for your dental practice.

### Overcoming the “Treatment Resisters”

Here’s an example of how database marketing can help you market your dental practice with a high degree of precision and accuracy. Let’s look at four stereotypical dental patients:

- **Polly Procrastinator.** She knows she needs a certain procedure but puts off scheduling the appointment for as long as possible. She doesn’t have a good reason, she just never seems to get around to it.
- **Alan Avoider.** He avoids the treatment with statements such as, “I’m not sure my dental plan covers that,” or “I just don’t have the money this month.”
- **Betty Busybody.** She never seems to have time to come back for the proscribed treatment. “I’d love to get that taken care of but I don’t know when I can squeeze it in. I’ll have to check my calendar and get back to you.”
- **Peter Pretender.** He believes the problem will go away by pretending it doesn’t exist. When you recommend a treatment, he typically responds with something like, “No thanks, I just came in for a cleaning today.”

What do these four categories of patients have in common? They all represent lost income for your business because they have all declined a recommended treatment and walked out the door. If you could bring back even a small percentage of these patients, think of the impact it would have on your practice!

With a good database marketing system, you can quickly and easily set up a targeted mailing program for each group of patients. Every month or so you can send a personalized letter reminding these patients of the need for and the benefits of the treatment you prescribed. Over time, a certain percentage of them will come back in for treatment. In this manner you can recapture business that would otherwise have been lost forever — all for a very low cost and at with minimal effort from you and your staff.

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Here's another argument for database marketing. Recent research has discovered that the overwhelming majority of markets contain a hidden reservoir of new patients — families who have not visited a dental office in twelve months or more. These families typically need treatment, not just a checkup or cleaning. Moreover, they tend to pay full office fees with cash or credit cards, meaning you get paid up front without the hassle and cost of billing an insurance firm.

Best of all, these prospective patients live or work right in your neighborhood. If even a fraction of these patients came into your office for treatment, it would represent a huge increase in revenues. With the right contact management system, you can get more than a fraction of these patients to come in for the treatment they need, and in the process, give your dental practice a real shot in the arm.

### **Cleaning Up Old Lists**

Keep in mind that even the most powerful database marketing system is only as good as the data you give it. If you own an established or mature practice, you may have hundreds or even thousands of patients who have not been in for many years. Some of these "inactive" accounts have probably gone away for good. On the other hand, a significant number of them will likely respond if you contact them again. The challenge is separating the wheat from the chaff.

To clean up old lists for your current marketing efforts, we recommend a process called "NCOA cleansing." NCOA (National Change of Address) is a service of the United States Postal Service to improve the accuracy of mailing addresses. The NCOA file is compiled by the USPS from change of addresses cards that are submitted by movers to their local post office.

You can clean up your patient files by matching them against the NCOA file to identify those who have moved and get their current mailing addresses. Better still, you don't have to slog through this tedious task yourself because it is performed by commercial vendors who are licensed by the Postal Service. For example, [www.ListCleanup.com](http://www.ListCleanup.com) charges \$2 per thousand names, and [www.AnchorComputer.com](http://www.AnchorComputer.com) charges \$2.75 per thousand names. Depending on the size of your list, you can get it cleaned up for what amounts to pocket change. A clean mailing list will save you time and money and — more important — yield a much higher response rate for all your marketing campaigns.

In today's highly-competitive markets, follow-up holds the key to a

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successful dental practice. Nothing makes follow-up easier than a good database marketing system that includes an effective contact management program. If you're not using database marketing as part of your overall marketing program, you're putting your practice at a severe disadvantage to those that do.

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## CHAPTER 6

# CASE PRESENTATION

### Case Presentation: A New Approach

Technically speaking, case presentation is not a marketing activity. However, no discussion of dental marketing issues would be complete without addressing this critical issue. Why? Because few elements have more impact on the growth and success of your dental practice than your ability to convince patients to accept your recommended treatments. In fact, having someone skilled in the art of gaining patient commitment can often mean the difference between barely breaking even and a highly profitable practice.

The main problem in this area is that that most dentists take an outdated approach to case presentation. They think that lecturing, instructing and obtaining consent from patients is the only way to get the desired results. While this approach may have worked in the past, today's highly-educated patients expect more. If you want to improve your ability to gain patient commitment on case presentations, turn your monologue into a dialogue and start having a real conversation with your patients.

Most dentists tend to blame the patient for a failed case presentation. However, research shows that in most cases, failed case presentations can be attributed to *low quality conversations between the dentist and patient*. In general, low quality conversations take place when the level of trust between the dentist and patient is low. To improve the quality of your conversations and close more case presentations, you must raise the level of trust between you and your patients.

Building trust requires four distinct steps.

- 1. Setting the context.** This step involves explaining the “what” and the “why” of the recommended treatment. In terms of building trust, the “why” is far more important. Before agreeing to plunk down their hard-earned money, patients want to know why the procedure is necessary and what the outcome will be.

To put their mind at ease, make a brief but educational presentation of the facts and possible consequences. When possible, use pictures, props and models to support your case.

During this step, remember to:

- Go slow. Don't overwhelm the patient with excessive information.
- Limit the patient's options. Too many choices will cause confusion rather than clarity.
- Be realistic about the time frame and outcome. For example, when faced with a severe case of neglect, you might say to the patient: "It takes time to get into this kind of problem. We need to develop a plan that allows us to..."
- Encourage questions. Remember that a conversation requires two-way communication.

2. **Negotiation.** Once the patient agrees to the treatment, the discussion shifts to who is responsible for what. This involves laying out the specifics of the procedure and what a successful treatment will look like when completed. The discussion should also include the fees, method of payment and guarantees, if any.

The patient also needs to acknowledge and commit to their responsibilities, which include showing-up on time for the appointment, complying with the financial arrangements, and anything else they need to do to ensure successful completion of the procedure.

3. **Performance.** This is the domain of the dentist. In order to build trust, the patient has to feel like you have performed the procedure in a competent, professional manner.
4. **Assessment.** The final step involves evaluation, review, feedback and follow-up. Remember that the relationship doesn't end the moment the patient steps out of your chair.

In essence, building trust requires that you stop talking *at* your patients and start talking *with* them. Make them feel like a partner in the process rather than an unwilling participant. Times have changed, and today's dentist needs to change with them. You can keep on using the old case presentation style and keep on getting the same results. Or, you can engage your patients in high-quality conversations and close a much higher percentage of your case presentations.

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## Hiring Treatment Counselors

As your practice grows, you will probably want or need to hire someone to assist you with the case presentation process. Bringing a highly-skilled treatment counselor on board involves a three-step process:

1. Understanding the skills required to succeed on the job.
2. Finding the right person for the position.
3. Training for continual improvement.

As with any position that involves direct contact with patients, the treatment counselor needs a friendly, pleasant personality and excellent interpersonal skills. It also helps to have a positive attitude and a strong desire to succeed. In addition to these characteristics, research has shown that the best treatment counselors also share a number of skills, aptitudes and attitudes. These include:

- Excellent verbal skills. Good treatment counselors enjoy making presentations to patients.
- A sincere belief in the value of the services being presented.
- A high energy level and a strong commitment to their work.
- A willingness to take the initiative. Good counselors don't hesitate to make the follow-up call, send out letters, or engage in that one last conversation with a patient who is considering elective services
- A high level of self-confidence combined with an innate desire to excel at what they do. Good treatment counselors are always looking for ways to improve their performance.
- A good knowledge of dentistry and the ability to accurately convey complex information to patients.
- Strong organizational and time management skills.

How do you find out if someone has these traits? The next time you interview for a treatment counselor, try the following:

- **Pay close attention to verbal and interpersonal skills.** Watch how the candidate responds to questions and presents herself during the interview. In particular, check to see if the candidate:

- Gets to the point when answering questions.
  - Makes clear statements that answer the question directly.
  - Gives information and opinions without being pressured.
  - Isn't afraid to disagree with your point of view.
- **Look for examples of past behavior.** Experts say that the best predictor of success on the job is past performance. Therefore, ask questions that will illustrate how the person performed in previous positions. For example:
    - How do you handle patients who balk at the recommended treatment? Give me an example.
    - When faced with multiple deadlines, how do you manage your time? Give me an example.
    - What do you enjoy about making case presentations?
    - Tell me about a time when you took the initiative on your previous job.
  - **Use role play.** Perhaps the best way to assess someone's skill level is to have them give an actual case presentation. Assume the role of a skeptical patient and have the candidate make two or three case presentations involving different treatments. In particular, pay close attention to their willingness and ability to close the sale.

Hiring is part art and part science, and nobody bats 1.000 in this arena. However, by following these steps you will greatly improve your chances of getting the best person for the job.

### Training Your Treatment Counselor

When it comes to training, the first step involves recognizing that even good people can get better. A small investment on your part in the ongoing development of your treatment counselor's skills will pay big dividends over the long haul. For one, it demonstrates to your treatment counselor that you are committed to helping them succeed on the job. More important, it ensures that you don't neglect or allow yourself to get complacent in this vital area.

One of the simplest and most effective kinds of training involves teaching treatment counselors to recognize common objections and respond with scripted answers. For example, take perhaps the most common objection: *"It costs too much!"*

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Most people feel embarrassed when talking about money. So when a patient complains about the cost, an inexperienced treatment counselor will back away from the subject and let the patient escape. With a little training, however, the treatment counselor can overcome the objection in a non-aggressive manner and greatly improve the odds of gaining commitment from the patient. For example, when a patient says, "It costs too much," the treatment counselor could respond with any one of the following:

- **The "easy to swallow" script.** "I realize that sounds like a lot of money, but we'll be happy to break down the fee into installment payments that are easy to swallow."
- **The "treatment is not cheap" script.** "You're right, the treatment isn't cheap. However, you'll find that our prices are competitive with other dentists, *and* Dr. Jones offers a very good treatment for your dental needs."
- **The "If you don't..." script.** "I understand your concern over the cost. *My* concern is what might happen if you choose not to have the treatment. Your situation will inevitably worsen, which could put your health at risk and require more expensive treatment in the future. In this case, it's better to bite the bullet and take care of the problem now."

Or, take the second most common objection: "*I'd like to think it over.*" A trained treatment counselor can offer one or more of the following gentle but persuasive responses:

- **The "think too long" script.** "In our business we have a saying that procrastination costs money. If you delay, the problem will only get worse. Let's make sure that you don't miss this opportunity to make the right decision at the right time."
- **The "main concern" script.** "What is the main concern you have left?" The patient will usually come back with something like, "It costs too much" or "I don't have time right now." The counselor can then deal with those specific objections.
- **The "have a reason" script.** "You must have a reason for saying that. Could you tell me what it is?" Again, the treatment counselor responds according to what the patient says.
- **The "medical attention" script.** "When someone needs medical attention, you get them to a doctor as soon as possible,

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right? By putting that decision off, you take a huge risk. We're in a similar situation. You need dental treatment at this time, so let's do the right thing and make the appointment now."

Will these kinds of techniques enable you to gain commitment from every patient? Of course not. Even the most skilled treatment counselors close only a portion of their case presentations. However, even a minimum of training will accomplish several important goals. It will:

- Help your treatment counselor focus on the importance of gaining commitment to the case presentation.
- Put them more at ease and give them more confidence during the transaction.
- Help a greater percentage of your patients make the right decisions about treatments they need.
- Increase your revenues by gaining commitment on more case presentations.

Of course, make sure the training also keeps your treatment counselor up to date on the latest advances in dentistry. Nothing will scare off a patient quicker than a treatment counselor who doesn't appear to know what she is talking about.

### **Teaching Your Treatment Counselor To Gain Commitment**

When your treatment counselor makes a case presentation, the patient can do one of three things:

1. Accept the recommended treatment
2. Decline the recommend treatment
3. Postpone the decision

Of these, only the first option represents a "win" for your practice. Yet, many treatment counselors hesitate to ask for any kind of commitment from the patient. Too often they settle for the third option, allowing the patient to escape without making a decision. Why? Because of the internal conflict they feel during the case presentation process.

Treatment counselors can experience a sense of conflict for many reasons. They may fear the rejection that comes with a "no" answer. They may worry about being perceived as too pushy or aggressive. Or perhaps they don't feel they have the right to ask the patient for a decision.

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So instead of pushing ahead for the desired outcome — a “yes” answer — they settle for a “maybe” in order to relieve their own sense of discomfort.

Regardless of the source, inner conflict on the part of the treatment counselor represents the #1 reason why case presentations fail. To help your counselor overcome this obstacle, explain that:

- Conflict is a natural, unavoidable part of the case presentation process. However, the counselor’s job is to help *resolve* the conflict, not avoid it.
- The best way to resolve the conflict is to get a definite “yes” or “no” response, not a “maybe.” A “maybe” feels like it resolves the conflict (because it allows the patient to escape) but until a decision gets made, the conflict still exists.
- When patients hesitate to make a decision, it usually represents an unspoken request for more information. The appropriate response is not to back off, but to review the benefits of the planned treatment and make sure the patient understands them.

One of the best techniques for helping treatment counselors overcome their discomfort and lead patients toward a “yes” is the assumptive close. With this approach, the counselor explains the benefits of the treatment and then asks a question that assumes acceptance of the plan. That puts the burden of the decision squarely on the patient and away from the treatment counselor.

Examples of assumptive closes include:

- Would you like to schedule an appointment for next week?
- Would you like to put this on your credit card or use our own financing program?
- Do you feel comfortable with the terms we have discussed? If so, please sign this consent form.
- Would ten a.m. next Friday be convenient for you?

Now comes the hard part. After making the assumptive close, the counselor must stop talking! Otherwise it takes all the pressure off the patient and puts it back on the counselor. Train your counselor to get

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comfortable with the silence that sometimes follows an assumptive close and *always* let the patient speak first.

In some cases, the patient simply won't make a decision. When that happens, stop the case acceptance process and allow the person to withdraw. You don't want to drive them away for good. Instead, offer to follow up by phone, saying, "It seems like you need a little more time. Why don't I give you a call next week and see if you have any more questions?"

Remember, the primary goal with case presentations is to get a definite "yes" or "no." You won't always achieve that outcome, but by helping your treatment counselor focus on the benefits to the patient rather than their own sense of conflict, you can dramatically increase your success rate.

### Tips for Gaining Commitment

To improve your case presentation acceptance ratio:

- **Adopt a "consultative" approach.** Ask plenty of questions, listen closely and tailor your case presentation to your patients' expressed needs.
- **Avoid over-extensive recommendations.** When patients come in for one specific problem only to get hit with an overwhelming treatment plan that costs ten times what they had in mind, their first instinct is to head for the door. It's better to close the deal on a lesser treatment than to make no sale at all.
- **Give patients a choice.** Most dentists present only the #1 choice (typically the most expensive) and don't disclose the second or third choices until the patient rejects the first. This makes the patient feel manipulated and decreases their trust in you. Instead, lay out all the options, explain them fully and give the patient a choice.
- **Pull, don't push.** Patients want information, not high-pressure sales techniques. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of each option, while avoiding a "here's what you *must* do" tone. Instead, try a suggestive approach, as in, "Here's the option most of our patients choose," or, "In your situation, here's what I would recommend."
- **Build an atmosphere of caring and trust.** Many people view

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the dentist-patient relationship as adversarial. To counter this mindset, every aspect of your practice — from your case presentations to your office décor to the way you answer the phone — needs to create a warm, friendly feeling that puts the patient at ease and reassures them that you have their best interests at heart.

These techniques may run counter to what you learned in dental school. But it's a brand new world out there, with a very different kind of patient. To overcome their built-in skepticism, focus on *their* needs, not yours.

### **Additional Resources**

For more good ideas on how to improve your treatment counselor's case acceptance skills, check out:

- "Relationship Selling: The Key to Getting and Keeping Customers," by Jim Cathcart (Berkley Publishing Group).
- "Let's Get Real" by Mahan Khalsa (Franklin Covey)

There are also a number of good Web sites that focus on developing selling skills. Check out [www.learntolead.com](http://www.learntolead.com). You have to wade through some product offers in order to gain access to the articles. But once there, the content is excellent.

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## CHAPTER 7

# CUSTOMER SERVICE

### Customer Service: The Final Piece of the Puzzle

Most people don't consider customer service as a marketing activity. In reality, the two go together like hand and glove. Good marketing will get people in the door, but it won't keep them. That's where customer service comes in.

Customer service is the glue that binds all your marketing efforts together. If you don't provide good customer service, you might as well flush your marketing dollars down the drain. Because you may get people to try your dental services once, but if they aren't happy with the experience, they won't come back. And the goal with marketing is to build loyal, long-term customers, not one-timers.

Everyone *thinks* they have good customer service. In reality, very few do. Why? Because customer service involves a lot more than just being polite and smiling at people when they walk through the door. It's an attitude, a philosophy and a way of doing business that incorporates all the little things that make patients feel special and appreciated so they want to come back again and again.

Volumes have been written on customer service. We couldn't possibly cover the entire subject in this booklet. However, the place to start is by understanding some of the fundamental customer service principles. Great customer service:

- **Begins with two basic elements.** First, you must have a quality product, then you have to deliver it in a manner that leaves the customer feeling like they received full value for their dollar. If either of these elements is missing, you don't have great customer service.
- **Involves meeting the *customer's* expectations, not yours.** Every customer has certain expected outcomes when they do business with you. If you fail to meet those expectations, they will find someone else who will.
- **Starts at the top.** If you don't make customer service a priority in your dental practice, it won't happen.

- **Requires ongoing education and training.** Most businesses (dental practices included) focus on their own internal needs rather than the customers. It takes training to teach people how to think like a customer and how to respond to their ever-changing needs.
- **Requires a team effort.** Getting the most from your marketing campaign requires the full understanding, participation and support of your staff. Your employees must know about the marketing effort and fully understand their respective roles in the planning and implementation of the campaign. Otherwise, all your efforts can go for naught.

Here's what can happen when you don't have everyone on board. Recently, we worked with a Southern California television station to set up a cooperative advertising program on behalf of several dental offices. The experience taught us that the weakest link in the operation was not the ads (which worked reasonably well) nor the patients (who responded by calling in better than expected numbers). Instead, the Achilles Heel of the operation involved the handling of incoming calls by dental practice employees who failed to meet even minimal standards for good customer service. Once the weakness became apparent, the TV network dropped the effort rather than assume the cost of helping the dental practices retrain their staffs.

The moral of the story? Never take for granted that when patients and potential patients call into your dental practice, their calls will be handled in an appropriate and effective manner. This doesn't mean that you have bad or incompetent staff. It just means that when it comes to delivering quality service, you can't afford to leave anything to chance.

### **Avoiding Customer Service Disconnects**

Have you ever experienced the following situation? You're in the middle of a transaction in a retail store when the phone rings. The clerk who was waiting on you stops to pick up the phone and leaves you standing there while he or she carries on a conversation with the person at the other end of the line. Frustrating, isn't it?

Unfortunately, these kinds of service "disconnects" happen all the time in dental practices. (We define service disconnect as "a situation where the delivery of your product or service fails to meet an expectation of the customer.") When service disconnects occur, they create dissatisfied, unhappy customers. Unless you rectify them, chances are those customers won't come back.

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What do service disconnects look like in a dental office? Here are some common examples:

- Dirty, dingy or disheveled waiting rooms.
- Rude, indifferent or incompetent receptionists.
- Lengthy waits (especially when the patient has a scheduled appointment).
- Accounting and billing mistakes. (Even worse is the failure to quickly rectify them.)
- Lack of payment options.
- Gruff, impersonal “chairside” manner by the dentist.
- Trying hard to sell a particular treatment versus taking the time to explain the patient’s options.
- Rushing through a procedure in order to get to the next patient (patients *know* when you are in a hurry).

Individually, these service disconnects don’t seem so bad. But each one (and this is only a partial list) can potentially drive patients away. Collectively, they add up to real problems for your dental practice.

The solution is to step back from your business and think like a *customer*, not a dentist. Examine every point where you make contact with the patient — from the time they first walk through the door to the time their check clears the bank — and see what you can do to make it easier, more convenient and more personal.

More than ever, it’s the little things in business that set you apart from competitors. After all, any dentist can take x-rays, clean teeth and fill cavities. It’s *how* you provide those services that makes all the difference between a healthy, growing practice and one that never really gets off the ground.

### **Walking the Talk**

In most companies (and this is true in all industries, not just dentistry) employees tend to see the marketing function as separate and distinct from their efforts to deliver the product or service. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Every contact with the

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customer/patient — whether by phone or in person — creates an lasting impression of your practice. For that reason, smart dentists make sure that all their employees have an understanding of the marketing function and a true customer service orientation.

How do you make great customer service a way of life (instead of just words) throughout your practice?

- Model great customer service. When your employees see you treating customers like gold, they will be inspired to do the same.
- Treat your *employees* like gold. Your staff will only treat your patients as well as you treat them.
- Track and measure specific customer service behaviors. For example, set a goal of answering every phone call within two rings. Or, make a point to address every returning patient by their first name.
- Respect the patient's time. Limit their time in the waiting room. Make it easy to fill out forms by mailing them in the advance or allowing them to be filled out on your Web site.
- Regularly solicit patient feedback. Use surveys to measure customer satisfaction. Ask your patients, "How can we improve?" and really listen to their answers.
- Constantly educate your employees through articles, books, audiotapes, seminars, etc. For example, have your employees read an article on customer service. Then convene a meeting to discuss how to incorporate ideas from the article into your practice.

Above all, train your employees to view customer complaints not as an annoyance but as an opportunity to improve service and build patient loyalty. Research shows that when an employee resolves a complaint in a timely manner, customers express more positive feelings toward the business than before the incident that caused the complaint.

Unless it is backed up by great customer service, marketing is a waste of time and money. Make customer service a team effort in your dental practice and start getting more from your marketing dollars.

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## Additional Resources

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For some great ideas on how to improve your customer service, check out the following books:

- “The Big Book of Customer Service Training Games: Quick, Fun Activities for Training Customer Service Reps, Salespeople, and Anyone Else Who Deals With Customers” by Peggy Carlaw and Vasudha Kathleen Deming.
- “Customer Satisfaction Is Worthless, Customer Loyalty Is Priceless: How to Make Customers Love You, Keep Them Coming Back and Tell Everyone They Know” by Jeffrey Gitomer.
- “Positively Outrageous Service” by T. Scott Gross.

In addition, check out these excellent Web sites:

- [www.attractandkeepcustomers.com](http://www.attractandkeepcustomers.com) The “archives” section contains some great articles on advertising and customer service.
- [www.customerretention.com](http://www.customerretention.com). Noted consultant Joanna Brandi offers tips, articles and a free newsletter that contain plenty of good advice for taking better care of your customers.

# CONCLUSION

## Taking Action

Three frogs were sitting on a log and two decided to jump off. How many were left?

The answer is three. Why? Because the two frogs only *decided* to jump; they didn't actually take the action. Therein lies the problem with most marketing plans. Time and again I see dentists expend a great deal of time and energy creating a plan, but for a variety of reasons they never seem to get around to setting things in motion. Then they wonder why their practices don't grow.

The best approach we have found for dental marketing novices is to start small. Pick one or two tools that apply to your practice and your target market and put them to work. Experiment with different approaches and see what works best, making adjustments as you go along. As you experience some success, gradually expand your efforts over time until you feel comfortable developing a comprehensive marketing program that can grow your practice to its full potential.

As you implement the various tools and techniques you have learned in this booklet, be sure to practice the three "P's" of marketing:

1. **Be patient.** Marketing involves a long-term activity that often takes time to generate results. The good news is that once you begin to achieve some success, your marketing efforts will tend to take on a life of their own and become self-sustaining.
2. **Be persistent.** Marketing is also an ongoing activity, meaning that you have to be doing something in the marketing arena all the time. Avoid a stop-and-start or intermittent approach at all costs. Also, when you find a particular tool, marketing message or approach that works for your practice, stick with it!
3. **Be positive.** People always respond better to positive marketing messages. Avoid competitor-bashing, scare tactics or any other high-pressure techniques that will turn off your target audience. Instead, focus on crafting a positive, benefit-oriented marketing message that will cause potential patients to feel good about deciding to use your dental services.

Ultimately, it all comes down to taking action. If you truly want to grow your dental practice, you *must* take action on a consistent, sustained basis. Don't allow yourself to get bogged down with indecision, inertia or fear that your marketing efforts will fall short of the desired results. Instead, write down the action items you intend to take, set a time frame for completing them, and then hold yourself accountable for following through. Before you know it, you'll be amazed at what you have accomplished.

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**DENTAL MARKETING CENTER**

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