

Dental Marketing Guidebook



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DENTAL HARMONY

Cost-Effective Dental Practice Marketing



Everyone knows how to market a practice: first, provide great service so that current patients refer you to friends; second, advertise so others will know what you offer. But while some offices thrive, others limp along because they pay attention to the details differently.

While some ideas here should be obvious, many dentists don't actually implement them consistently or in an optimum way. Cost-effective marketing also requires planting seeds well in advance of the need to fill the schedule. Prospective patients rarely respond to the first message and often will want to interact with several practices before committing to an appointment.

Good marketing should be an ongoing, diversified process with a minimum budget of 5% of the practice's gross, depending on how competitive your area is.

In Part I of Dental Practice Marketing, we will discuss approaches to the goal of improving the bottom line with fresh thinking and better management of prospecting and the patient experience. Practices often think too narrowly about marketing, as if it really matters whether net income is increased by doing something more cost-effectively, the percentage of treatment acceptance is increased, or the added revenue is from new or current patients.

Keep Better Track of Patient Activity

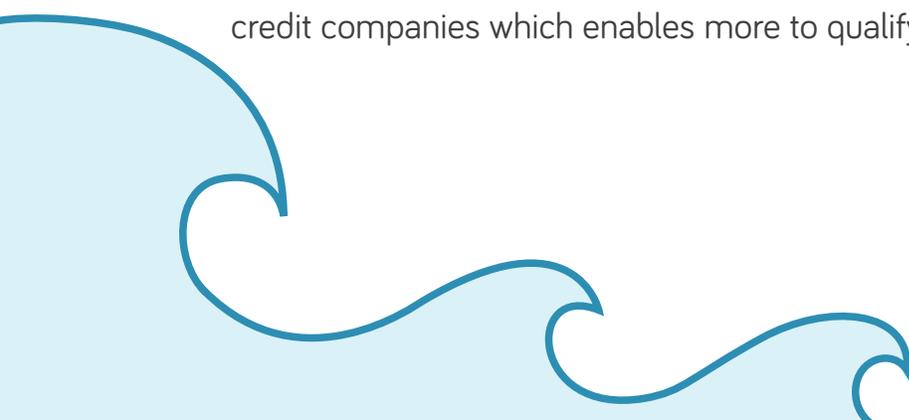
Studies have shown that finding a new long-term patient costs on average six times more than simply retaining a current one, yet many offices lack a system to recognize when patients are overdue for a check-up or treatment. In one survey, 75% of new patients returned after their first visit, but just 85% of current patients set another appointment, a high attrition rate. Many offices have no idea how many they have treated, yet all those records are the least expensive way to potentially increase income. Find out who should have come back, why they didn't, address the issues, and incentivize them with a significant discount coupon.

Reduce No-Shows

It's expensive to block time and have a current or new patient not make the appointment. Each one should receive a reminder by email or text a week before that mentions that you have set aside the time to focus on their needs and that rescheduling must be done during office hours (your voicemail should state that cancellations messages cannot be left). The day before the appointment, call and confirm or leave a message (by the dentist for new patients). Keep anyone who calls to cancel on the phone until they reschedule. Have a list of patients who would like an appointment sooner to fill gaps.

Increase Average Patient Spending

According to the Health Policy Institute of the ADA, the average child spends \$645 a year, an adult 21-64 \$649, and seniors \$767. They're already in your chairs, so ask what would it take to increase treatment acceptance. Patients often don't understand that delaying will only result in more damage and greater expense. Reevaluate presentation tools and skills, put educational literature that is not full of jargon in the waiting room, and add creative financing (Comprehensive Financing is an alternative to the traditional dental credit companies which enables more to qualify).



Expand Awareness of Options

Many people still have the last century's image of dentists as mainly filling cavities. Track who has watched a presentation on oral health while waiting in the chair, who has discussed options for their particular case, or has taken home a brochure explaining how you can improve their smile with better dentures, the latest implants, or invisible orthodontics. With a third of the public seeing no dentist in any given year, there is a marketing opportunity to focus on specific topics many need to know about.

Get Publicity

Make sure healthcare reporters and writers know about your expertise by providing a press kit to radio and TV channels, newspapers, magazines, websites, and blogs in your area. Provide a lively biography (rather than a boring list of credentials and memberships), a smiling snapshot, a list of topics you can address and questions they might want to ask. Don't "sell" your services or criticize competitors when you're being interviewed, just provide audiences with education on oral health. Make yourself available anytime you don't have a patient in the chair, including before and after office hours. Be sure your website has a video showing that you are personable and articulate.

Hold Events at Your Office

Bring current and prospective patients to special events by offering discount coupons to attend a few hours of education and fun for the whole family, with refreshment, entertainment, and short videos. Or hold fundraisers or informative meetings for nonprofit organizations you support, with a sweepstakes drawing for anyone who attends.

Make Hours More Convenient

You probably set office hours before the Great Recession. Many now get less time off from work for doctors' appointments, work more hours, have longer commutes, and may have lost their dental insurance. Others who aren't in financial trouble may have more commitments to after-school activities or community organizations. Survey patients to see who might appreciate coming in early, late, or a half-day on the weekend.

Advertise Smarter

There is greater resistance to advertising now, as consumers are bombarded by thousands of marketing messages daily. To break through the clutter and cost-effectively get prospects to respond, you have to do things differently. If you haven't been advertising, save radio and cable TV until you get more experience, since they require expensive frequency to have impact. Instead, start by having someone study the print ads of competitors for what they say, how large they are, and where they appear. You'll be surprised how few there are, which is an opportunity to stand out without spending a lot:



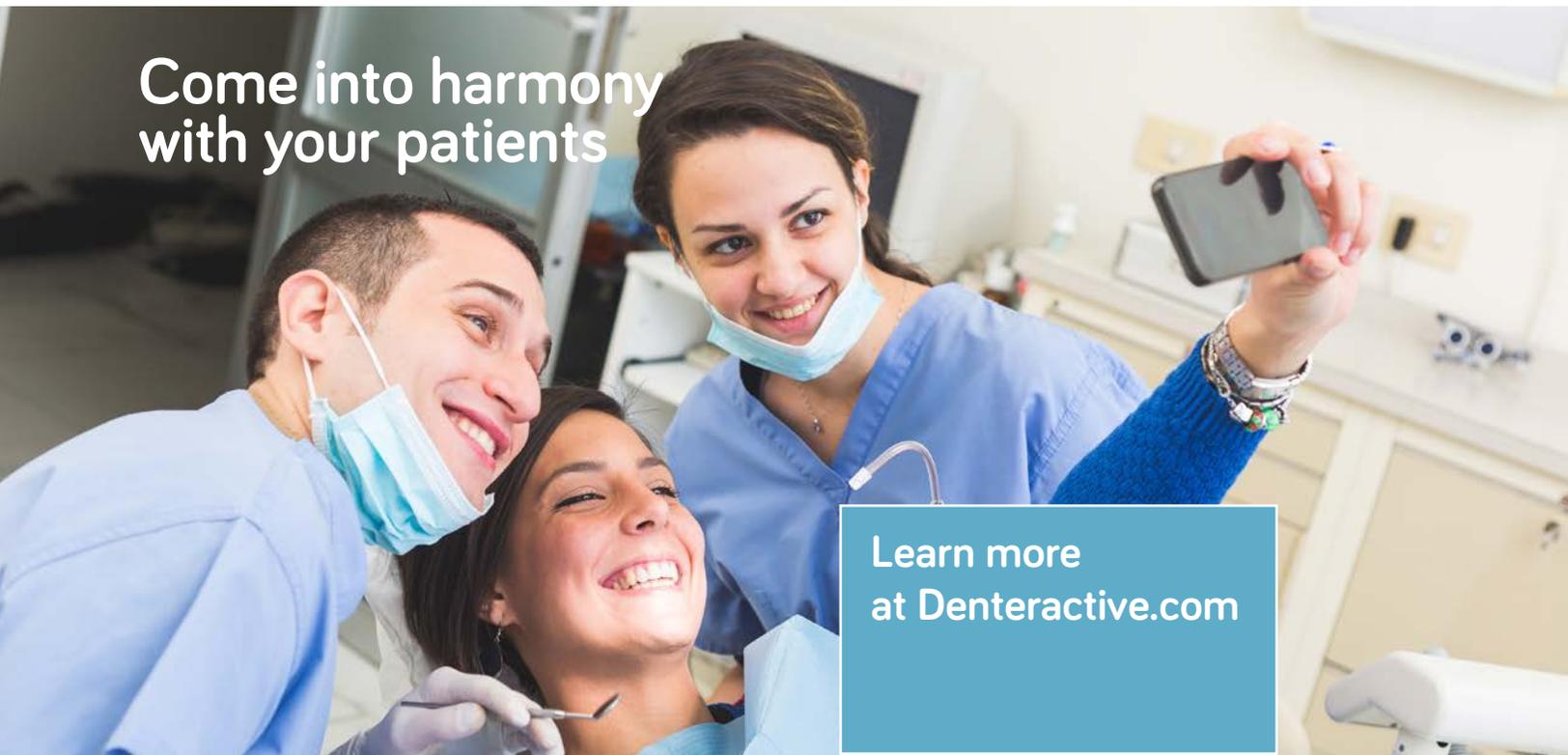
- Mine them for what they are promoting and prices. Do they differentiate themselves by offering a no-obligation consultation, free whitening, pain-free treatment, a huge discount on a package of services, treatment for TMJ or sleep apnea, or more convenient hours? How can you make your practice distinctive?
- Can the ads be easily seen or are they too small or are they wasting money on something that is unnecessarily large or in a premium position and therefore expensive? Is the design attractive or cluttered? Have a staff member study a book on small business advertising to pick up tips to make your ads stand out (like putting a limited amount of white text on a quarter page of black background).
- Do your competitors use humor? You and the staff can brainstorm ideas that can be fun and stick in the minds of readers.
- Place ads in specialty publications, neighborhood newspapers, and organization newsletters, where readers feel a loyalty to those who support their interests. Don't advertise in every issue: repetition increases the impression on what will be roughly the same audience each time, but to save money, you could have similar impact by appearing in a monthly every other month.

Direct Mail Delivers

Despite all the benefits of online marketing, one way to stand out is to provide something physical that will definitely be seen. According to the Online Marketing Institute, effective direct marketing campaigns integrate everything from mail and email to your website and social media. Direct Mail News reports that the average response rate to postal mail was 4.4%, while email was .12%. Part of the reason is that rented mailing lists are usually of high quality, having been regularly updated. Test mailing a postcard to 500 homes in the nearest high-income zip code.

Specialists Should Schmooze

Being the best technically isn't enough to get general dentists to switch their current relationships, while others are convinced by seminars that they don't even need to refer. Send a brochure as a reminder that you can tackle the most complicated cases, while providing an easy way to educate patients before they see you. Be active in your local professional societies. Get to know colleagues personally by going out to dinner or for drinks, attending sports or music events, going camping, and so forth. Be patient and persistent in dropping treats and your bio by offices in the area and chatting with the staff.



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