Direct mail, email or social media: What’s best in dental practice marketing?

There’s been a swing in the electronic-versus-paper pendulum

By Sally McKenzie, CEO McKenzie Management

You may have heard that the U.S. Postal Service is losing money. Evidently people aren’t sending as many letters through the mail, and more are paying their bills electronically. So what does this mean for dentistry? Plenty. For starters, that friendly mail carrier just might be the key link between you and a host of new patients.

Today, direct mail marketing is as strong as it has ever been. Why? The obvious reason is that fewer businesses are using it. Instead they are filling up your electronic mailbox with special offers, promotions, catalogs, coupons and the list goes on. They are inundating consumers with email, consequently, what was once old is new again. Snail mail marketing is back, and we’re all the better for it.

While electronic communication and marketing have exploded, so too has the amount of digital garbage. Spam and junk email folders collect hundreds of marketing missives that are targeted for us but miss their mark. Web page ads become digital wallpaper on our computer screens. It’s there, but we don’t notice it like we did when it was new. Don’t get me wrong, email and electronic communication are absolutely critical in effectively marketing a dental practice. But they are only part of a total marketing strategy.

What’s more, direct mail can be used for a multitude of marketing purposes, including generating new patients, reconnecting with former patients, creating awareness of the practice in the community, educating patients and the community about services, and the list goes on.

Case in point: “Dr. Maxwell” recently took over a practice in a smaller southwestern city. The dentist she bought it from was retiring after many years. Maxwell has invested a fortune in updating the equipment, technology and décor. The place looks fantastic, but the patient base under her predecessor had been dwindling. There were plenty of patient records, but the problem was that only a fraction of them were active. Maxwell needed to get her practice name into the community. She needed to reconnect with former patients, and she needed to set herself apart from the other dentists in the area.

To her credit, she didn’t attempt to go it alone. Maxwell worked with a professional dental marketing company to establish her practice’s brand, develop a custom website and train her team. But even with several marketing pieces in place, the puzzle still wasn’t coming together. She needed to increase the number of new patients.

Direct mail, like many marketing tools, tends to be misunderstood. Typically, dentists will claim that direct mail doesn’t work, doesn’t deliver the patient numbers they want and is too expensive to bother with in this age of electronic communication. Yet, few truly under-
stand how direct mail works and the fact that the return on this investment can be huge — provided it’s done right. However, as is often the case, it’s not the “tool” that fails, typically it’s the manner in which it is used. In other words, most direct mail campaigns that don’t produce results are poorly executed.

In Maxwell’s case, an overall marketing strategy was developed for the practice to implement over the long term. One component of that strategy was a direct mail campaign. During the course of 12 weeks, the campaign targeted prospective patients with professionally designed direct mail pieces. The phones were ringing. Her staff was trained to handle the increased phone and patient activity, and she was well on her way to rebuilding the practice patient base.

Email and social media: marketing answer or just a fad?

Certainly, direct mail is a long-standing staple of marketing, and while social media has become increasingly important in an overall marketing plan, it’s critical that electronic communication be used, but not abused.

Certainly, there are exceptions to the rule, but the vast majority of patients would happily receive information on practice services, an occasional electronic newsletter and definitely appointment confirmations through email.

Consider the numbers. According to www.b2bemailmarketing.com, email is used far more than Facebook and Twitter combined. How much more? Daily activity for Facebook is pegged at 60 million updates. Twitter sees about 140 million tweets per day. Email: 188 billion messages. Clearly, email has become a primary mode of communication in this electronic age.

Used wisely and as one component of a multipronged and clearly defined practice marketing strategy, email can be an excellent and efficient means of staying in contact with patients between appointments. It’s not the only way or the single best way to communicate with them, but, if done well, email can help you to effectively market your services, your team and your practice.

Getting the process in place won’t happen overnight, and while it does take time and some professional guidance, it begins with asking your patients one simple question: May I have your email address so that we can send you appointment reminders and other practice information?

The vast majority of your patients will be more than willing to share their email addresses with the office. They may want some assurances that their information will be kept confidential and not sold to any other third party vendor. And there are specific laws and regulations that must be followed when sending email, so seek the guidance of a professional dental marketing service. But done right and as part of an overall marketing plan, email marketing can be yet another excellent tool in an ongoing and effective practice promotion strategy.

Once you have collected 500 or more email addresses, you can begin developing a plan to communicate with patients.

Most practice management software programs enable you to automatically remind patients of upcoming appointments via email. An occasional email newsletter can be ideal for informing patients about new services in the practice. If you are active in your community or engaged in volunteer work or mission trips, an email newsletter is an excellent, cost-effective tool for communicating to patients what’s happening with the practice, the doctor and the team.

The type of information that you would include in the newsletter would be reflective of your practice’s brand. It would be geared toward the target audience that you and your professional dental marketing company have identified.

One of the best aspects of email is that it can be used to not only improve communication with patients, but also to improve practice efficiency.

An email and text appointment reminder is a service that all offices should offer. Certainly, not all patients will be interested and it is important to ask them first. But more and more people prefer email and/or text message reminders to telephone reminders.

That being said, some individuals with particularly frenetic and busy lives will want all three — phone, email and text. This is a simple step to help ensure that patients are in the chair at the appointed time, which keeps production on track and overhead under control.

Effective use of email raises the logical question, what about social media? Practices without a clearly developed marketing plan and strategy will often times look to social media as the quick and easy answer. They think if they create a Facebook page, new patients will come flocking. In actuality, Facebook alone does virtually nothing for a practice. It can be incorporated into an overall marketing strategy as a means of keeping patients that have “friended” or “liked” the practice informed about new services, team activities in the community and the like.

But be wary of those who claim that all you need to market your practice is email and social media. Truth be told, these are relatively small pieces of a total practice marketing plan. They are not free and they are not the “silver bullet” that will drive droves of patients to your door.

Marketing, like dentistry, is both an art and a science. There is no single treatment that will cure all dental disease. The same holds true for marketing the dental practice. There is no “silver bullet” technique to effectively market dentistry. It requires a plan, a strategy and a system that is an integral part of running the business.