Know your market
When you've established who your customers really are, you can organise your business to provide the care benefits they are looking for, says Glenys Bridges

Previous generations of dental professionals did not have to concern themselves with developing marketing skills or finding ways to attract new and retain existing customers, unlike dental professionals today. Now, a fundamental part of practice management is to implement activities used by another businesses competing for customers' disposable income. The cost of failing to build a positive practice image and patients' confidence can be devastating.

Dental businesses need to deliver customer-focused marketing measures to ensure the viability of the business. This requires a fundamental understanding of the local and national dental-sector markets and customers. The dental market has a great deal in common with many other service-sector markets, therefore the acquired wisdom of effective marketers can be translated into the dental context, provided that the numerous legal and ethical standards in place to protect patients are observed.

Understanding the dental market begins with a grasp of who our customers are and what they really want from us. When this has been established, the business can be organised to provide the oral wellbeing and customer care benefits customers are looking for.

Marketing activities need to focus on the implementation of consistent measures to ensure that the needs of internal and external customers are suitably met. To effectively maintain levels of income during this economic climate, managers must apply a range of skills to scrutinise the communication processes currently in place. Managers need to interpret information gathered through research to understand customers' needs and consider the impact of emotional and financial factors on their buying behaviour.

Getting to know patients
Healthcare professionals base their prescribing decisions upon normative needs, aiming to do what is needed to make the patient dentally fit. One healthcare professional's definition of what is clinically necessary, 'acceptable' or 'desirable' may differ from that of another.

Patients' perceptions are based upon felt need, for example, what they feel needs to be done to correct a perceived problem, alleviate a condition, and/or improve their appearance. If the patient doesn't perceive that there is a problem, or doesn't realise that it is treatable, their felt needs are greatly reduced. This all shows that marketing in a dental environment is becoming increasingly complex, as a result we are moving into an era where the combination of the knowledge and understanding acquired by formal education and training, together with practical application the hands-on experience is the key to marketing success. Those managers equipped with such skills will be at the forefront of management and reap rich rewards in the dental business environment.

New qualification
In response to requests from practice managers, the Dental Resource Company has launched Level 5 BTEC Professional Diploma in Dental Practice Management.

The units of the course cover a range of specialist skills for dental practice managers and include dental markets and customers. Visit www.dental-resource.com for more information.