Marketing: Does your practice have what it takes?

By Sally McKenzie

The topic of marketing raises numerous questions. How many ads should I buy? How many brochures will I need? Should I give away refrigerator magnets, what about stress balls or key chains? How much do I have to spend on advertising? Do I need those fancy, full-color brochures? Is a website really necessary? Exactly how many new patients will I get if I place an ad in the newspaper? Will people respond if I offer a discount? How big should the discount be? And, in the minds of many dentists, most of those questions have only one answer: money and lots of it.

While dollars can quickly become an issue, some dentists will spare no expense. They are convinced that if they just get the right jingle on the radio, the perfect image in their ads, or the most vibrant colors on their brochures they will unleash a flood of new patients, better patients, more patients that will happily line up for the doctor's dental services. They eagerly pour thousands into big-bucks marketing campaigns convinced that they can buy all the patients they want with clever ads, gorgeous brochures, or witty radio jingles.

Short-term gain/Long-term loss

Oftentimes these practices will see terrific initial success. Patients are flowing in. The schedule is full. The doctor is happy and convinced that the marketing campaign was just what the practice needed. Then the cancellations begin. The patients don't schedule the recommended treatment. They take advantage of the whitening offer, but never return. A few months down the road little has come of the grand marketing investment as the ‘new’ and the ‘better’ patients have moved on to the next bigger and better offer. Leaving the doctor totally baffled as to why this brilliant campaign produced utterly dreary results.

What went wrong? Too often practices consider marketing as a purely external activity. Dental teams overlook the very foundation of practice promotion. The best advertising for your practice can’t be found in the newspaper, won’t be heard on the radio, and can’t be Googled on the Internet. It has little to do with the catchy jingle, the full-color printed pieces or – you’ll be glad to know – a monster cash outlay.

Rather, your most effective promotion begins at the front desk; ventures into the reception area, winds its way into the treatment rooms, and travels the halls daily. The success or failure of your practice marketing plan rests not on the ‘what’ but on the ‘who.’

Before you pour more money into external advertising and promotion, shore up your internal marketing and you’ll significantly increase the chances of that short-term campaign producing long-term results. Make the most of your practice’s ‘marketing representatives’ – the staff. Start by preparing the team to successfully promote the doctor, each other, the services, and the office as a whole.

Organize your marketing team

Begin with a clear goal and a specific vision from the doctor. This doesn’t need to be an elaborate or time consuming exercise. It’s simply a matter of answering a few key questions. First, what kind of dentistry do you want to do – more restorative, cosmetic, implants? Do you want the hygiene department to grow, be reduced, or stay the same? Then share the vision and goals with the team. Seek their input in how to achieve the objectives. When employees see themselves as instrumental in helping the practice to achieve defined results they have a much greater interest in working toward those outcomes.

Provide necessary education for the team, so that they fully understand the benefits of the dentistry you want to provide, and don’t overlook the frontline. One of the best resources a practice has to promote services is the front desk, but these employees are seldom offered training and typically they have very little understanding of the level of dentistry provided. Few things can kill a patient’s confidence quicker than a poorly informed employee.

Use your monthly staff meetings for the doctor and team members to educate each other on specific procedures as well as new and existing practice services. The better the education and training provided, the better the staff are prepared to inform the patients, answer questions, and continuously promote what each member of the team has to offer patients. All of which elevates professionalism of the entire practice.

Expectation marketing

After education, focus on expectations. The best internal marketing consistently delivers on the expectations of the patient. The average patient isn’t looking for foot massages or Champaign cocktails from their dentist. Most patients have a few basic expectations they want you and your team to deliver on the first time they visit your practice and each appointment thereafter, including the following four:

Timeliness. Patients expect the office to run reasonably on time. If the doctor or hygienist is behind schedule, telephone patients may wonder why they can’t make up theirinternal marketing results or reschedule if necessary. If you can’t reach the patient and have to wait for more than 20 minutes, give them a letter signed by the doctor that apologizes for the delay, thanks them for their understanding, emphasizes that the practice makes every effort to remain on schedule; however, occasionally special circumstances arise that affect the schedule, and include a $5 gift card to a Starbucks or a similar gift in the envelope. The patient may still be frustrated from the delay, but they will appreciate that the practice acknowledged the inconvenience.

Stability. Patients expect a doctor and team they can count on. If yours is a revolving door practice and each time the patient comes in for an appointment there’s someone new in the office, whether it’s the front desk staff, the hygienist, you assistant, the patient will feel this is a practice struggling with stability.

Information. They expect to be able to ask questions and receive clear answers. As I noted earlier, prepare your team. In addition, develop a list of frequently asked questions and their answers and keep them handy throughout the office.

Credibility. Patients expect you to deliver what you promise. If your razzle-dazzle ad campaign claims your practice is ‘state-of-the-art’ because you have that fabulous new digital X-ray system, but the rest of your practice smack of vintage 1980s, the patient will feel misled. If your practice claims to be modern, the patients should be able to see it from the moment they walk in the door to the moment they drive away.

First impression or last

Carefully consider your practice’s first impressions. Examine the patient experience in its entirety. Review how new patient appointments are handled. What may be standard operating procedure in a practice could come across as insulting to a prospective patient. For example, the new patient who calls to schedule an appointment and is greeted with the question, ‘Do you have insurance?’ Let me tell you our financial policy immediately feels unwelcome and defensive. Educate them first on the excellence of the doctor and team. Get basic expectations they want you and your team to deliver on the first time they visit your practice and each appointment thereafter, including the following four:

Compliance. Patients expect the office to run reasonably on time. If the doctor or hygienist is behind schedule, telephone patients may wonder why they can’t make up their internal marketing results or reschedule if necessary. If you can’t reach the patient and have to wait for more than 20 minutes, give them a letter signed by the doctor that apologizes for the delay, thanks them for their understanding, emphasizes that the practice makes every effort to remain on schedule; however, occasionally special circumstances arise that affect the schedule, and include a $5 gift card to a Starbucks or a similar gift in the envelope. The patient may still be frustrated from the delay, but they will appreciate that the practice acknowledged the inconvenience.

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