Touting your wares
Marketing your practice gives you the chance to make it utterly irresistible to patients. Simon Hocken explains

The benefit of being your own boss is that you can focus on the kind of dentistry that interests you. However, without a bespoke marketing plan designed specifically to suit your needs, you will not be able to attract the right patients and your expertise will go to waste.

Marketing enables you to make your practice utterly irresistible to patients seeking your high-value treatments. It lets you tailor your patient base, picking and choosing who you want in your appointment book.

At the moment, the industry is seeing the rise of branding as dentists seek to create a culture within the practice that adheres to the dentist's unique vision. This is the necessary step that a practice needs to take to remain competitive going forward, particularly in the current financial climate. Principals and practice owners need to think about how the practice, environment, literature, website, dental team and working systems fit together and complement one another. With a coherent approach, a recognisable brand can be established that will make it much easier to communicate your service to patients.

After branding, the next stage is niche marketing, and implementing loyalty systems to reward patients who return for treatment, and encourage loyalty to your brand.

**Marketing strategies**

Your business is unique. Your marketing approach needs to be unique too. The essential marketing strategies include reaching out to 'dormant' patients who perhaps have not returned to the practice in a while, and re-activating any incomplete treatment plans.

Send a letter out to patients who have not visited the practice for a certain period of time (24 months is a good yardstick). Make a point of pleasantly stating that you understand how the patient might be nervous about being reprimanded for not keeping regular appointments. You could reinforce this with a special offer of a half-price check up, to be redeemed by a set date.

Patients with treatment plans that have not been completed should be contacted by the dentist and offered a 'smile check' to encourage them to return to the practice by highlighting any concerns they might have about their oral health.

Leading practices have also discovered the benefits of a referral card, which allows loyal patients (who are of course overpayed with the service they receive!) to pass on the practice's contact details to their friends and family.

Also, if you have not implemented a website, you need to – today. A website is the most cost-effective marketing tool, and can host news about your practice, special offers, contact details and a wealth of information in several formats about your treatments. You can even include testimonials from happy patients.

**Research, research, research**

Dentists need to understand the local demographic in order to have a complete picture of the patient base. Without this, any strategic business planning will be sorely limited.

As well as looking at prospective patients, you also need to look at your team. This requires an audit. Look at the skills each of your dental team members possesses, and think about the opportunities these skills unlock. Also consider how to make the most of these skills.

When new patients come to the practice, find out how they respond to your brand, and what they think of the environment itself. This has the twofold effect of making patients feel like an intrinsic part of your business (which of course they are), and enables you to find out if your marketing strategy works.

One enormous question dentists need to answer when marketing their practices is, ‘Who is my audience?’ Divide your desired patients into segments such as the over 50s in transition, orthodontics (adults/children), family dentistry and think about the opportunities that this affords.

The competition

Of course, once you've analysed your audience, you then need to analyse the competition. Chances are, there are several quality practices in your area. Why not visit their websites, look at their treatment lists? You could even visit the practices themselves. Then compare the standard of service offered by the competition with your own standard of service.

You can do this by mystery shopping. Call your own practice at set hours throughout the day. Find out exactly what your prospective patients are experiencing when they make that first call. This may give you food for thought about how to improve things.

Ensuring a return

When you are looking to break through to a new plateau of success with your business, ROI should be uppermost on your mind. Try and monitor how many new patients visit your practice, and how many return for treatment. Ask new patients where they heard about you, and why they chose you, so you can tweak your marketing to make it even more effective.

If you consider that your average marketing spend for each new patient is somewhere between £25 and £90, this will give you an idea of what you need to get a return on your investment. As you draw up your marketing plan and budget, consider how many prospective patients become actual patients, and what treatments they are likely to need or take up.

With marketing such a vital part of modern dentistry, many dentists have chosen to work with leading coaches to help them discover how to implement the best strategies in order to guide their business in the desired direction. With bespoke solutions, advice and support from Breathe Business, for example, dentists, principals and practice owners can learn from experts who not only possess a wealth of experience when it comes to working in dentistry and owning practices, but also have a firm grasp on developing market trends and proven business strategies.

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**About the author**

Simon Hocken BDS has owned two private practices and is an accredited coach with Chris Barrow to form a new business training and coaching company called Breathe Business. For more information call Breathe Business on 01548 855860, email simon@nowbreathe.co.uk.