Dear Bhavna,

I have just newly taken over a practice. My biggest challenge at the moment is getting new patients to walk through the door. Do you have any pointers for me?

This is a real problem many can relate to, especially if you are developing a new practice or have just taken over a practice of whose marketing efforts you know little about.

It is important to develop a continual stream of new patients, no matter which practice you are in. This is so that you have a constant source of dentistry. New patients are the life-blood of any business. They allow you to have some level of leniency when getting case acceptances. For example, if you don’t seem to be having a good month with patients going ahead with your treatment recommendations, then at least you know you will have that constant stream of new patients walking through the front door. It’s all about creating a safety net for yourself and having that reassurance that your business has its head above water.

The best way of attracting new patients to your practice is with an effective marketing strategy. This is not an action but more a plan of action. If the plan is incorrect then all your actions will be wasted (not to mention wasted money too).

An effective marketing plan is about understanding what kind of patients you are wanting in your practice and also whether it matches the types of treatment you are offering. Then it is about how to make the connection between the two. For example, there would be little advantage in advertising a cosmetic practice in an area where the major concerns were primarily health due to little extra disposable income. So you would need to think about venturing further afield to attract your most ideal patients.

The types of media you should consider are networking in your local area to build-up relationships with local traders who can refer you patients. This is marketing with the long term in mind.

Other things you can do is work on your existing patients and provide them with some loyalty bonus for referring you more patients. So for every new patient referred you might want to give away free hygiene visits or whatever else you can afford. Remember if you have taken over a practice, your biggest and cheapest asset in terms of marketing will be your existing patients. You can easily send them information on your in-house referral programmes because you have their details.

Make sure you have an easy to steer website and have it optimised for major search engines. Other more extravagant things you could do is to organise charity events where each person must bring a friend with them. You would then take the details of this new prospective patient and market to them. Also, you could get great media coverage where you can get the opportunity to state how you are different.