Giving something back to the profession

Dental Tribune speaks to Mike Volk Sales and Marketing director at The Dental Directory on celebrating the 40-year-old business

Mike Volk: The Dental Directory is a 40 years old business that is still owned by father and son with no outside shareholders and our focus is entirely on serving our customers.

We've got to where we are now through holding around £18m worth of stock at any one point, which has virtually eliminated back orders, so we can reinvest in the business. The reality is that we do a lot of market research, so we know that customers rely upon our dealers having the product in stock, which is why we carry around £18m of stock at any one time in our automated warehouse.

DF: You reinvested £4.5m in the past four years to improve services; I understand that automated warehouses were one of them, was there anything else?

MV: Well, it's about having enough space to accommodate that £18m worth of stock, but it's also about making it more efficient. We can process more than 6,000 orders a day without any issue at all. To give you an idea, we're taking about 2,000 phone calls a day from customers; we then process those orders for free overnight delivery by 12:00 the following day. The automated process means, in essence, that the box goes to where the product is stored; this makes it impossible for a picking error to occur, because the box won't move on if it hasn't got the right product and quantity in it. This system is also paperless so it is both economic and environmentally friendly.

DF: It staggers me that there are more than 26,000 products in dentistry, from the big appliances to the gloves; tell me more.

MV: We stock about 18 different composites which have upwards of 11 different shades, and there are probably about 1,000 different burs and bur sizes so it's easy for the number of products to multiply. An interesting thing that we also find is that once a dentist has become loyal to a product, they will stay with that product, even if the manufacturers make a new model!

DF: So you keep old pieces until they discontinue them completely?

MV: Yes -- and we've got loads of those sorts of products; we're buying six units a month of these types of products to satisfy just five or six customers. It's difficult, but it's all part of the service, and instead leave it to smaller, supported dealers and offer them even better service. The reality is that we do support the profession; however I'm surprised that a lot of consumers don't appreciate that fewer people are going to the dentist and that both private and NHS dentistry are suffering. Also, dentists are facing unprecedented increases in regulatory costs, so we thought we'd help our customers and offer them even better value and that's why we've put out these promotional offers.

DF: What about the more philanthropic side of the business? I understand that The Dental Directory is very supportive of the profession too?

MV: Yes -- we support about 15 professional groups in the UK. Examples include the AOG through to DPL through to CODE. We offer their members exclusive promotions, but more importantly we offer a rebate to the managing committee to further the aims and objectives, which are often of a charitable nature, of each group. We also support the provision of education using bursaries; an example of one is the bursary we provided for the MSc in Restorative and Aesthetic Dentistry delivered by the University of Manchester and Smile-on.

At the end of the day, we're happy to give something back.

DT: So how will The Dental Directory be celebrating the 40 year landmark?

MV: What's interesting is that if we go back 40 years, the chairman Gordon Mills, who started the business thought that to celebrate 40 years we would run our largest ever promotional campaign -- The Value + campaign. So, from September onwards we will be carrying promotions on 1000's of everyday, essential product lines; it will be our biggest ever promotional push and we're doing it because of these economic times. We're trying to help our customers; we appreciate that fewer people are going to the dentist and that both private and NHS dentistry are suffering. Also, dentists are facing unprecedented increases in regulatory costs, so we thought we'd help our customers and offer them even better value and that's why we've put out these promotional offers.

DF: What kinds of lines are you looking at?

MV: Oh everything, from aesthetics to composites, to rotary hand instruments right across the board; it's our top moving line. We're taking between 17 and 30 per cent off our retail prices, depending on the product, so it's going to be a big push from us to help our customers in these difficult times.

We're doing special flyers and advertising and our 28-strong sales team will be communicating these prices to our customers. And the interesting thing about our guys, unlike all other dealer reps, is that they don't get paid commission. There's no incentive for them to over-sell, they're purely there to detailing the products and promotions and help our customers in any way that our customers want us to help them.

DF: Excellent -- so I take it you're going to Showcase with the different offers?

MV: Oh yes, we'll be there and have our 40 strong team and hospitality tent ready to welcome all our customers for a free cup of tea or a beer!

DF: So how long is the offer running for?

MV: The promotions will run until the end of December; however, we'll refresh them at the end of each month, adding even more products!

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In the last three to four years we've put back into the profession more than £1m in various ways, including a new Dental Chair in primary dental care at the University of Warwick Medical School.

We do support the profession; however I'm surprised that a lot of the larger multinational companies, whether they be dealers or manufacturers, don't support the profession more and instead leave it to smaller, family owned businesses.

At the end of the day, without the profession The Dental Directory would not exist, so we're happy to give something back.