Walking among giants
Marketing dentistry in the global connected economy

By Chris Barrow, UK

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. These prophetic lines were shared by Nobel laureate and social scientist Dr Herbert Simon in 1971. It seems incredible to think that his words predate the Internet by 20 years. Simon lived in a world in which advertisers tried to gain our attention with billboards, newspaper advertisements and television commercials. At the same time, the local ma-and-pa business prospered through convenience and human interest.

The connected economy and growth in population have created statistics that are beyond our comprehension. There were 60 trillion websites at the last count and every year the Internet grows by eight new trillion new books, 16,000 new films, 30 billion blog posts and 182 billion Tweets. Google handles 35 billion e-mails every day alone, and 8 billion photographs are uploaded to the Cloud from everywhere around the globe. I speculate as to how many of those photographs are of happy, smiling faces.

IBM tells us that we are a “world awash in data,” 80% of which is currently invisible to our computers; however, with the IBM Watson project, the company intends to use cognitive computing to bring that data into a usable domain. With global health care data expected to grow by 99% in the next 12 months, the search is on to find a new unified theory that will bring all of this information to the fingertips of government, business and individuals.

The question is, can we cope with this? In his book Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow, Israeli author Prof. Yuval Noah Harari visualises a completely connected world in which “Data is the Dium-nates. There he writes: “Sapiens evolved in the savannah thousands of years ago and their algorithms are not built to handle 21st Century data flows. We might try to upgrade the human data-processing system, but this may not be enough. The Internet of All Things may create such huge and rapid data flows that even upgraded human algorithms won’t handle it. When cars replaced the horse-drawn carriage, we didn’t upgrade horses—we retired them.”

Perhaps it is time to do the same with Homo Sapiens.”

A rather grim and ominous suggestion perhaps, but by jolting our sensibilities, Harari makes us pause for thought. Let us narrow our field of vision from these impossible numbers and facts. Pundits suggest that you and I are interrupted by advertising and brand exposures 5,000 times in an average day and mentally register around 150 of these. We note 150, think briefly about 80 and pause at 350 of these. We note 150, think briefly about 80 and pause at 32 to think about whether they are relevant to us at this time. Thus, the challenge facing the dental marketer is how to become one of 12 out of 5,000 at the right time, on the right day, for the right person.

I have watched the world of digital marketing in dentistry very carefully over the last five years and have reached some conclusions that are likely to land me in trouble with traditional digital marketers. However, I did not get where I am today without stepping on the fenced-off grass every now and then, running along the side of the swimming pool and tearing up the rule book. So, here is my recommended list of actions to be taken by the independent dental practice in order to gain attention:

1. Use good search engine optimisation (SEO) to optimise your position in Google’s organic search. SEO is a technical skill that has to be delivered by experts. Google changes its own goalposts regularly and the savvy SEO guru will know that and take appropriate action quickly.

2. Massively encourage the collection of Google reviews, user reviews via Facebook and critic reviews via proprietorial sites like WhatClinic.com, NHSChoices and CompareTheTreatment.com in the UK. In September 2016, Google changed the rules twice, first by including external reviews alongside its own in searches and second by altering its own search criteria to favour businesses with in excess of 100 Google reviews. It is necessary that your marketing activity be adjusted to reflect such changes.

3. Connect to your patients through a well-maintained social media channel like Facebook or Twitter by maximising its own search criteria to favour businesses with in excess of 100 Google reviews. It is necessary that your marketing activity be adjusted to reflect such changes.

4. Build a website that engages the visitor through video and visual testimonials. Your most powerful marketing collateral is the stories that your patients can tell about the difference that they have made to their lives.

5. Collect visitors’ e-mails and consent to use e-mail via white paper marketing. A coffee shop, hotel or airport exchanges free Wi-Fi access for an e-mail address and permission to keep one informed. You can do the same by exchanging useful information (free guides).

6. Nurture long-term relationships with patients and pros-

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I have given you nine market-
ing actions designed especially for
the smaller business. Actions that
should be avoided by the inde-
pendent dental practice are seek-
ing to gain attention by paying
through the nose for Google or
Facebook advertising, broadcast-
ing non-human interest material
or selling services on price, dis-
count or special offer. This is be-
cause every week I hear from den-
tsists and their marketing teams
that advertising to strangers,
using jargon and cutting prices at
best attract nobody and at worst
attract bargain-hunters, price-
shoppers and moozers.

“A wealth of information cre-
ates a poverty of attention.” We
end where we began. The chal-
lenge is for the mouse to gain at-
tention without competing with
the herd of elephants. You can only
do that by stepping away from the
herd of elephants and delivering
your story in a different way and
a different place. For me, that
means human interest, personal
service and recommendation, and
so when I am working with clients
on their marketing plans, we focus
on and mobilise their most val-
able asset: the goodwill of their
existing patients.

So Mr Patient, now that we have
arrived at the end of your course
of treatment, I’d like to ask a
couple of questions:

• Are you happy with the clinical
outcome? Are you happy with the cus-
tomer service that the team
delivered?

If so, I’d like to ask some favours:

1. We are growing the practice at
the moment and we would
like to see new patients and
would love to see more people
like you, because we like you! Would it be OK to give you
three of my referral business
cards to pass on to any family,
friend or colleague who may
be interested in visiting our
practice?

2. We have noticed that online
reviews are growing in impor-
tance and would like to invite
you to submit a review of your
experience on Google, Face-
book or any other review site
that you may be connected to.

3. We love to collect testimoni-
als from happy patients. They
are great for our marketing
and can give confidence to
others who may be nervous.
We find that 90% of those
who do consent to a testimo-
nial prefer a written commen-
tary, as they are uncomfor-
table with a video camera
recording, whereas 10% are
happy to be filmed and photo-
graphed. May I ask, are you
a 90%’er or a 10%’er?

4. If a 90%’er, I’d love to organise
a written testimonial from
you.

5. If a 10%’er, we would like to
invite you to one of our quar-
terly video testimonial even-
ings here at the practice.
Every three months, we set
aside some time early evening
and invite four to six of our
10%’ers to come along for
some light refreshments and
to have their photograph
taken professionally (at our
expense) and to be filmed for
4 minutes or so. The questions
we ask on videos are: How did
you find us originally? What
was it that had you looking?
How was your customer ser-
vice experience? What differ-
ence did the treatment make?
It would be lovely to invite
you to our next event. The
dates are...