Five keys to effective marketing

By Scarlett Thomas
President, Orthodontic Management Solutions

Orthodontists around the country continue to report reduced practice volumes, and the talk of recession is making them ever more watchful of this key indicator of practice health. With an increasing number of general dentists offering orthodontics, aligners and veneers to “straighten” teeth, orthodontists may be feeling more than ever the need to augment their marketing efforts. Creating a marketing plan tailored to your individual practice can capture potential patients’ awareness, stimulate interest and positively impact your case acceptance. Successful practices know the needs of their market and strive to meet those expectations on many levels.

Key No. 1: Assign a marketing coordinator

I recommend hiring someone to work with you week in and week out to manage aspects of your marketing program — making deliveries to referring dentists, replenishing game supplies, shopping competitive practices or getting bids for a direct mailing. An energetic, stay-at-home mother whose children you treated and who is not interested in developing your accomplishments is a good choice. If you prefer to have staff handle the position, you want them to want the job, so have them apply for it — don’t just appoint someone. Select the person who has exhibited the most enthusiasm and creativity for such work and has satisfied administrative skills. Don’t, however, expect staff to handle marketing during regular business hours. If you do, they’ll fail. Most marketing maneuvers will value logging the extra hours.

Key No. 2: Establish an annual marketing budget

Six percent of total collections should go toward marketing or 10 percent if you plan to do external campaigns — direct mail, radio, cable TV ads, etc. Collections of $50,000 translate to a $50,000 to $50,000 annual commitment. Spending from $2,500 to $4,150 monthly keeps the budget viable. If, after these systems are operating smoothly, you still feel your cash flow won’t support marketing, consider a low-interest loan that allows you to bring in income with increased patient starts while you’re making payments. My company, Orthodontic Management Solutions, works with several dental assistants that offer financial aid for such endeavors.

Key No. 3: Know your competition

Knowing how other orthodontists in your immediate area market themselves is essential for differentiation and improving your efforts. Have your TC make copies of competitors’ quotes from prospective patients and ask staff to collect samples of competitors’ Websites and print ads and to view movie credits, follow up materials and apply these monies to your marketing efforts the following year.

If, after these systems are operat- ing smoothly, you still feel your cash flow won’t support marketing, consider a low-interest loan that allows you to bring in income with increased patient starts while you’re making payments. My company, Orthodontic Management Solutions, works with several dental assistants that offer financial aid for such endeavors.

Key No. 4: Build your marketing program

Every practice should have a yearly marketing plan broken down monthly into internal and external campaigns. Orthodontists must focus consider- able effort on internal patient appreciation and reward programs to promote patient referrals, but often fail to ask for the referral.

Here are ways to change that: Keep small displays in various locations that read, “We want more patients just like you and would appreciate your referral.” Hand out cards that offer incentives (cash, a chance to win a large prize; e.g., an iPod) for referrals. Check out www.orthoconsulting.com to purchase customizable cards and related materials.

New patients are most excited about treatment at its beginning and dehiscing. At least at these times, ensure someone is assigned to ask for referrals and hand out referral cards. Practice saying such things as, “Gosh, we enjoy having John here, and we’d love to have more patients like him so if you have friends or relatives who would benefit from orthodontics, please give them our name.” Clin- ical assistants who remind patients of how far they’ve come pulling up pretreatment photos from time to time increase the idea of referring patients’ minds. Asking for referrals will feel awkward at first, but after you do it a few times and see numbers go up, it will get easier.

External marketing efforts are often focused on cultivating relationships with local dentists and staffs. While dental assistants that still financial aid for such endeavors.

Key No. 5: Measure success

If you can’t measure your market- ing program, you can’t manage it. Establish a routine where your front office staff and TC ask how prospective patients heard about your prac- tice and track the results. At quarter- end, count the patients who responded to each marketing activity versus how many started treatment. You may find that activities reaching the most calls have poor conver- sion rates and vice versa. Knowing which ideas work and which don’t allows you to modify your plan.

Conclusion

Although marketing is integral to the prosperity of your business, most orthodontists have little functional knowledge about how to promote themselves or handle consultations satisfactorily. With a budget, game plan and tracking system, you can become as proficient at directing this facet of your practice as any other.

Orthodontic Management Solu- tions invites you to learn more about marketing and how to incorporate a plan for your practice, offering its workshop, Increasing Case Acceptance, in San Diego on Nov. 7-8 or March 20-21. Please visit www.orthoconsulting.com for more infor- mation and to register.

About the author

Scarlett Thomas is an orthodontic practice consultant who has been in the field for more than 25 years, spe- cializing in case acceptance, team building, office management and marketing. As a speaker and practice consultant, she has an exceptional talent to inform, motivate and excite.

Contact

Scarlett Thomas
Orthodontic Management Solutions
Phone: (858) 455-2149
scarlett@orthoconsulting.com
www.orthoconsulting.com

Ad spaces often be developed through the broadcasting entity in a packaged deal. Get quotes to do a direct mail campaign. Direct mail companies can sort households by ZIP code, salary, age, number of adolescent children, etc., and can develop materials that reflect the professional, fun or high-tech nature of your practice. Explore search.orthodontistdirect.com for mater- rial and services at reasonable rates.

The key to effective external mar- keting is sustainability. Your target audience will become aware of your message only with repeated expos- ure, so engage in such activities when you can sustain them for six months at a time.

Contact

Scarlett Thomas
Orthodontic Management Solutions
Phone: (858) 455-2149
scarlett@orthoconsulting.com
www.orthoconsulting.com