The right way to market an ortho practice

By Roger P. Levin, DDS

How do you know if you are implementing the right ortho marketing strategies? Could you be doing more? In today’s sluggish economy, how can you maximize your efforts?

Talking with a new client, I was dismayed to learn he’d spent several years and tens of thousands of dollars on external marketing efforts that generated only minimal results. The proper program, along with excellent management systems, can predictably increase practice production by 50 percent or more. By marketing to referring doctors and patients, you can attract new patients and experience unprecedented growth.

Case study

Jim* was a 31-year-old orthodontist who had been in practice for four years. He had engaged a generalist who had been in practice for four years. He had engaged a general marketing firm to create his corporate identity — business cards, stationery and a practice brochure. The firm also provided advertising and direct mail services and charged Jim a retainer on an annual basis and direct mail services and charged Jim an annual basis.

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Jim called me to talk about his situation, and I immediately realized he was making one of the classic mistakes we often see in orthodontics. Jim had done absolutely nothing in regard to meeting or getting to know his referring doctors and was attempting to build his practice strictly on corporate identity, direct mail and advertising. I immediately explained to him that I doubted the approach he was taking was going to be completely effective. Here’s why:

• Corporate identity marketing doesn’t work by itself. The development of a corporate identity — business cards, stationery and a brochure — is necessary, but will almost never attract patients. I have always contended and still believe that the simplest logos in the world will attract almost the same number of patients as the one that costs $10,000 and takes six months to design specifically.

Am I saying you don’t need a corporate identity? Of course not. These materials are a necessity for any orthodontic practice, but they represent a specific approach to marketing and should be used in conjunction with more active forms of marketing, especially referral marketing. In our Total Ortho Success® Referral Marketing programs, our consultants work with clients to create attractive corporate identities, but more importantly, they emphasize that referral marketing is the key approach.

• Direct mail is ineffective. Direct mail firms will tell anyone that there is a 1.5 percent or greater return on direct mail and that the customers will gain a return on investment. While that sounds good, in the last 25 years, I have seen most of these campaigns in orthodontics fail. Direct mail also can be extremely expensive in terms of design, printing, address lists and postage costs. And still, after spending a lot of money, there is no guarantee you will achieve the coveted 1.5 percent response rate either, which still means 98.5 percent of your marketing efforts are being wasted.

For orthodontic practices, direct mail is a risky way to attract new patients and can waste a great deal of time and money.

• No referral marketing was being done. Jim was not doing any marketing directed at his referring doctors. The one, almost guaranteed, approach to building orthodontic practices is marketing to referring doctors combined with marketing to patients. When I use the term “referral marketing,” I am referring to using proven strategies in a consistent marketing program managed at all times by a professional relations coordinator (PRC).

Predictable marketing, dependable results

Orthodontics is different from other types of businesses. Companies such as LL Bean and Land’s End live and die by catalogs and Internet marketing. Orthodontists, on the other hand, depend on referrals from doctors and patients.

What’s the best way to gain new patients? Identify current and potential referring doctors in your area and begin marketing to them. As I discuss in my Total Ortho Success Seminars, the secret of referral marketing lies not only in the quality of marketing but also in its quantity. Most referring doctors do not respond to one or two attempts to gain their referrals. Instead, it’s a gradual process of attracting doctors over a six-month period.

The potential for dynamic growth

Jim, the doctor in our case study, had been wrongly advised by another orthodontist to not bother with referring doctors. He was told referring doctors are uninterested, unappreciative and have already decided on certain referring specialists.

Jim was misinformed.

Referring doctors are more than willing to establish new relationships. Practices that engage in referral marketing can grow dynamically after five or six months. Referral marketing, when done consistently, is highly predictable. When proper systems are in place, more than 98 percent of practices experience growth in less than 12 months.

After several years of trying unsuccessfully to build a practice that met his vision and goals, Jim was ready to try a new approach. Spending far less, he implemented a complete referral-based marketing program, and within 12 months, practice production jumped 27 percent. Now, in his second year, Jim is on track for 31 percent additional growth.

Conclusion

A consistent, ongoing, referral-based marketing program is the key to growing your practice. With the right program in place, you will gain new patients, dramatically increase production and achieve breakthrough profitability.

* Based on actual Levin Group client information

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About the author

Dr. Roger P. Levin is founder and chief executive officer of Levin Group, Inc., the leading orthodontic practice management firm. Levin Group provides Total Orthodontic Success™, the premier comprehensive consulting solution for lifetime success to orthodontists in the United States and around the world. A third-generation dentist, Dr. Levin is one of the profession’s most sought-after speakers, bringing his Total Orthodontic Success Seminar Series to thousands of orthodontists and ortho professionals each year. For more than two decades, Dr. Levin and Levin Group have been dedicated to improving the lives of orthodontists. Levin Group may be reached at (888) 973-0000 and customerservice@levingroup.com.