

## Common Marketing Problems *by William Howard Horrocks*

I thought it might be useful to describe a few marketing problems some of my clients have had, and how we went about solving them. My experience has been that many practices have the same or similar problems. Maybe you'll see something here that will help you in your particular situation.

### **The Invisible Dentist**

Doctor Bill's practice was surrounded by many other businesses. The problem was, he had no patients from those businesses. They didn't seem to know he was even there. Solution: We created a simple flyer that made an offer, and hand delivered it to the owners or managers of the neighboring businesses. Now, visiting your neighbors with a small gift of friendship isn't a terribly new idea. But it's not often done. I would encourage you to do it.

The flyer was simply a letter sized sheet of paper folded in half. Since this was done in January, my headline on the outside of the flyer was "We'll Give You \$100 For Your New Year's Resolution." The flyer opened and the inside read, "Dear Neighbor, If you've made a New Year's resolution about your dental health, now is your chance to make good on it and save \$100.00." We then described the offer, which was an exam and consult (\$100 value) at no charge or obligation. The offer didn't include x-rays, so they had to pay something. We put the offer into the form of a dental health certificate and made it look like a check. Kinko's or any copy place should be able to design one for you. We also pointed out that we were close to their work place, so they could make an appointment on their lunch hour or right after work. Printing costs were under \$25.00.

Dr. Bill had one of his staff take a stack of flyers and go around to the neighboring businesses. She'd say, "Hi, I'm Teresa from Dr. Bill's Family Dental Care, just across the street. We're introducing ourselves to you and our other neighbors by offering dental care health certificates worth \$100 for you and your staff. How many employees do you have?" She counted out the number, handed the flyers to the manager or owner, engaged in

some friendly chit chat, and went on to the next. In two hours, she passed out 200 flyers. Not one person said they were interested. End result: 19 good new patients from surrounding businesses, most of them commenting, "I'm glad you're so close to work. I didn't know you were here."

### **Personal Contact Works**

You can mail the flyers, but it's much more effective if you hand deliver them because of the personal contact. We repeated the promotion at various intervals during the year, changing the headline to something appropriate to the season. In July we did "Declare Your Independence And We'll Give You \$100.00." Low cost, small effort, nice return, always works. Tips: Have a female staffer do the personal contact. Don't make the flyer slick or high tech looking. In fact, it works better if it's rather pedestrian almost like something your kid would bring home from school announcing the 6th grade carnival. I've tested it both ways many times, and the more pedestrian looking version always produces better results.

### **Signs - Your Silent Salesman**

Dr. Z. had a similar invisibility problem. His practice was in a residential area and signage restrictions meant his sign looked like a postage stamp. And even though a small sign was better than nothing, what we really needed to do was get his name and number in front of thousands of people, not just the few hundred who drove down his little street. We found a heavily traveled street three blocks away. We put a back lit sign on it with his phone number. It was expensive, but now thousands of people see it every day as they drive by. He now has great new patient numbers.

It sounds simple - get a sign where people can see it - but it's rarely followed up on because of the flack you can get from landlords and public officials over the size and location of the signs. But, if you can fight through the bureaucratic quagmire and pull it off, you will never regret it and you will kick yourself for waiting so long. Find the heaviest traveled road near your practice (your building doesn't even have to be on the street) and find

a way, by hook or by crook to get a sign on it. The sign should say YOUR NAME, DENTIST and your phone number. If there's room, put your address, but don't get too much on it - people driving by will only view it for a few seconds. The general rule is no more than five to seven words on a street sign or billboard. The phone number counts as a word. Make it as big as you can get it.

### **You Will Meet Resistance**

I will tell you right now you will run into resistance. You will be told by landlords, landowners and public officials that you absolutely can't have a sign. It will look impossible and you want to give up. And maybe you'll have to. But most of you will give up way too easily. Landlords who won't let you have a bigger sign on your building can be dealt with like this: "You know Mr. Myopic, I've realized that my business is suffering tremendously because my sign can't be seen unless you're right in front of it. In fact, I figure I'm losing \$\_\_\_\_\_ a year [fill in the blank, but make it a high number - because it is]. I'm willing to do anything to correct this, right now, including moving to another location. Isn't there something we can do to work this out?" It's amazing how fast his objections will disappear when he finds out you would actually move over the sign issue.

If you're told by city officials that there are restrictions, then ask to see the actual city code or look it up for yourself. You may be surprised to find out it isn't illegal - or that with some minor changes it would suddenly become legal - and that you were just told your sign would be illegal so you would go away. Don't take some bureaucrat's word for it. Check into it yourself. Or hire a real estate attorney to get a variance. These are granted all the time. It's easier to get a variance if your landlord is on your side. You get him on your side with the words above. City, county and other officials will make everything difficult. You have to be willing to fight back.

### **The Unexpected Media**

Dr. Arnold was located in a blue collar neighborhood. Most people had good jobs. He wanted to reach these people but had poor results with

direct mail. We surveyed his patients to find out what media they read. It turned out that a high percentage read The Little Nickel - the local Pennysaver newspaper. This little newspaper is like a garage sale in print. It's usually given away free and has ads for used merchandise. Now this is usually not the type of media I like my clients to use (too low class), but our survey revealed that most of his patients read it regularly. However, I felt it would be a waste of time to be buried in the back pages among all the used washers and dryers. The doctor's marketing person pulled off a coup and landed a front cover spot. I designed an ad about his practice, using a woman and child photo. It was good, but in this case the location of the ad was the reason it worked, not so much what was said or offered. Result: 35 new patients in the first two months. The extra cost for the front cover was well worth it. Warning, don't use this media if your neighborhood is white collar. These people do read the pennysaver, but they ordinarily won't buy their professional services from someone who advertises there.

### **Filling The Associate's Chair**

Dr. Susan recently brought in an associate and wanted to fill his chair. It was going slowly and the associate was getting discouraged and began to imply he might want to go elsewhere. Dr. Susan wanted to hang onto him, because unlike the others, he was a "keeper." We needed patients right now - no time to patiently build up a strong referral base that pay off down the road. We would do that later. Another problem was that even though Dr. Susan was perfectly willing to let some of her patients switch to the associate, the patients were, understandably, reluctant to do this.

Solution: Because of the addition of the associate, the practice could now expand it's hours to some evenings and Saturdays. The associate would work these hours. We wrote a letter to the patient base introducing the new doctor. We described his credentials and really built him up. We were honest about it and said the new doctor needed some patients and would our valued patients please tell their friends about him? We made it easy for them to do this by including a dental health certificate that offered 50 percent off tooth whitening and/or \$75 toward any treatment. But the certificate was only valid if the patient made an appointment with the associate. Result: full book for the new doctor, and fast.

## **Sell The Insurance**

Most of my clients are fee-for-service dentists. None accept managed care plans, but most accept certain indemnity plans. Often, there are large groups (teachers, police, etc.) who haven't yet been co-opted by managed care, and still have decent insurance. If this is true for you, then you can be quite successful by selling the insurance rather than your practice. Here are two examples:

Dr. Bob was interested in attracting the faculty and students of a nearby college. We knew they all had a particular insurance plan that was acceptable to Dr. Bob. We took out an ad in the student newspaper that said "Attention Students and Faculty of Smith College. Do You Have ABC Dental Insurance?" Then we went on to say what their policy covered. "Did you know that your plan pays..." You see, most people don't know what their insurance covers. So we told them and also told them that we accepted their plan. Result: lots of students and staff as new patients.

## **Getting Teachers As Patients**

Here's another approach. Dr. D. found out that all the public school teachers in his city had an insurance plan that he was happy to accept. We contacted a mail list broker from the yellow pages and bought a mailing list of all the teachers in town. We sent them a simple postcard that was very similar to the college newspaper ad in the previous example. Result: lots of teachers in the door, most of them commenting, "I didn't even know what my plan covered until I saw your postcard."