

How I Made Every Mistake In the Book and How You Can Avoid Doing the Same

Ten Hard-Won Marketing Lessons (and One Warning)

by William Howard Horrocks

In nearly ten years of working with dental practices I've made every marketing mistake you can make. Twice. They are probably the same mistakes you're making now. Hopefully I can help you avoid at least some of them. Here, stripped of any fluff, are some lessons I've learned the hard way.

1. Generally speaking, people will not travel from a "higher" economic area to a "lower" one for their professional services.

They will buy other things like clothing and household items from stores located in the lower economic areas, but they will usually not hire an accountant, see an MD or go to a dentist who isn't in their same economic area or higher.

If your practice is located in a part of town that has a middle to lower economic status you might think that all you have to do is send mailings to the "better" area to draw people from that area to yours. It sounds perfectly reasonable, but I've never seen it work that way. And I've tried it many times. So don't waste your money, it won't work.

The higher rent/lease payments for the better neighborhoods are worth it. If your area is considered low class (e.g., the housing projects are nearby) then move. And do it now. Don't wait 10 years to discover the truth of what I've just told you.

2. If your town or region slips into a depression or recession then move immediately.

I know it's expensive, I know your spouse and kids will not want to leave, I know they've got a nice life and friends and church and all that but I'm telling you I've seen this over and over again. Don't wait, it will just get worse.

Move now, take the financial and emotional hit and rebuild your practice

and your lives in an area where you have a fighting chance. You can try to hang in there until your neighborhood or town bounces back but what if this takes 10 years to happen? Why be miserable for ten years?

Do you know that I've sold thousands of my books to dentists all over the country, (the world really) but I rarely sell any books in and around Las Vegas, Phoenix or anywhere in the Southwest? It's even more rare that any of my clients come from these areas. I asked a dentist I know from Las Vegas what could be going on. He said it was because these areas have been undergoing an explosive growth over the last decade or longer. They simply don't need my help because they are doing fine on their own.

Most dentists, chiropractors and other professionals in Las Vegas have all the patients and clients they need.

So, if Long Island's economy is down, you might enjoy a great life in the Southwest. The weather's better too.

3. As with the differences in economic areas, a similar pattern of behavior exists in a geographic sense. People will not usually cross bridges, freeways or other natural or man made boundaries to receive their professional services.

I don't know why, but having to take a bridge across a river to go to the dentist is just not something people will do.

Again, I'm not saying this is always the case - this is a generality - but it's something I've observed over and over again. So when contemplating a relocation of your existing practice, or the opening of your first practice, it would be a good idea, in addition to any other demographic or population flow studies, to also consider the geography of the area. Where do the patients you would really like to attract reside? Look at all the avenues and approaches these people will have to take to arrive at your practice. You should get in your car and drive these routes yourself. What will they have to drive over or through to get to you? Will they have to drive through a gang-infested area or over a bridge? What about crossing a freeway or railroad tracks? These are all serious no-nos.

Also don't forget to discover how the general population regards the different geographic areas in your city. For example, I've lived in Seattle my entire adult life. I know there are certain parts of town that I not only wouldn't live in but don't like to drive through either. Nearly every city of any size has these areas. The locals know where they are. If you don't (maybe because you're new to the city) then I would encourage you to find out so you don't locate in a part of town that few people will want to visit.

Be suspect of a "great deal" in rent or lease payments. There's usually a very good reason a landlord offers low lease payments and it's almost always because the neighborhood is bad and he can't charge premium rates. Otherwise he would, don't you think?

You may indeed be getting a great price but you will pay for it with low patient flow and deadbeats, which will ultimately cost you much more than you will ever save in low rent.

4. Don't be "slick." Be professional.

Even as verbose as I am, this is a hard one to explain. Words are my life but I'm not sure I can communicate this clearly. There is an important truth here but it's hard to put into words. Here goes:

The tone, flavor, and "color" of your promotions, ads, brochures and indeed all of your marketing, has to be such that you don't subconsciously exclude your target market (the unintended message of an expensive looking piece).

Your ads, mailers and brochures should be professional but not "slick." Slick turns the majority of people off, even the ones who can most easily afford you.

The message is: don't be slick, be professional. Don't be aloof, be accessible.

5. You can break the rules if you have a good reason.

I have a client who has the most impressive CV you've ever seen. He's studied with the best, he's taken every continuing education course you

can imagine. He has been educated and trained at the top schools on the planet. He has been published countless times and is THE dental consultant for a major magazine that you all have in your waiting rooms. Hell, he's even been on Oprah! Yet he has been told by other marketing people that "the general public doesn't care that much about your background, so don't even bring it up." This is true often enough that it might even be a "rule" but in this case my client's CV was actually a huge plus. You see, his target market happens to be a group of physicists, corporate executives, and physicians. They are all very well educated and affluent people. They want someone who is on their level, who is as proficient in dentistry as they are in their fields. So we promoted his unique qualifications with terrific results.

Break the rules when it serves you and don't shy away from or deny what can be your greatest strength to your target market.

6. You can get so hung up in labeling yourself that you can unintentionally turn away a large segment of your business.

Let's say you want to be known as a cosmetic practice. You seek only patients who want porcelain crowns, veneers and the rest. You won't go near an amalgam or a kid. You turn your practice into a "dental boutique" and change your name to "The Center for Esthetic Dentistry."

This is all fine and good. I actually have plenty of clients who are doing just this and I've been quite successful in helping them to attain such a practice. But realize it's a much smaller market than the "family" practice. A mother, in choosing a dental practice for her family, does not want a dental boutique. She wants a playroom and friendly staff who will tickle her kids and give them coloring books.

If you want only to be a dental boutique then be willing to give up much of the Mom and the kids market. Many of my clients have made that choice and are doing well but realize that's a lot to give up.

Another approach might be this - have a playroom, give out the coloring books and position yourself as a family and cosmetic dental practice. You can still refuse to use amalgam but you're not stuck under a label that tells your public that you only do one thing.

A dentist called me the other day and said he was worried that people wouldn't know that he also did root canals.

He correctly perceived that his marketing had too narrow a focus and was costing him a good portion of the family market. So be careful how you label yourself. You could label yourself right out of the market.

7. The best, most cost effective and highest return on investment marketing you and your staff can do is summed up in just two words: Be friendly.

One of the first things I do with a new client is have him or her survey the patient base. The information garnered from a good survey can be quite revealing. What we mainly want to know is why these parents chose this practice and not the other one down the street and why they keep coming back.

After surveys on thousands of dental patients from all over the country I can tell you the answer to both questions is nearly always a variation of, "because the doctor and staff are friendly."

People buy things from friendly people and say good things about them. They recommend their friends, slap you on the back, trust what you say, follow your recommendations and bring presents to your kids. They do none of these things for the unfriendly.

8. Don't be afraid, just call them.

Being friendly can translate into all kinds of activities but probably the best action you can take along these lines is to call all the patients you've seen that day. Call them at home to see how they're doing. Dentists think it's intrusive and therefore back off from doing this but the patients don't see it that way. They love it.

Also, try this. In addition to calling your patients after you've treated them, why not call them before their first visit? This will allow you to establish some kind of rapport with them even before they come in. If they are able

to gain some familiarity with you before they actually arrive, the first visit usually goes much smoother and they are less likely to blow off that all important first visit.

Here's something so axiomatic that if you don't see its truth then you may need to plug the nitrous leak in your hose and observe a little longer: Your income is directly proportional to the amount of attention you pay to your patients and potential patients.

Think about this for a while you may have a startling realization.

9. Should you give anything away?

We've all heard a hundred and one dental truisms - those little pieces of information that become platitudes. Like, "something free isn't worth having." Or, "ask a patient to pay a dollar and you get a dollar patient."

I don't totally disagree with these but you should know there are definitely times you may need to offer a freebie. Offering anything for free is risky, but there are times when it could be the right thing to do. Ninety percent of the time I advise my clients to use offers which require the new patient to pay something. Having them pay will make them value it more. Make the exam and consultation free but charge \$29 for the x-rays. Charge \$19. But generally don't say "FREE" or \$1.

But there are exceptions to this and I know many dentists who are very successful in giving away something. When is the right time to do it? The key is, "who am I talking/writing to?" If you're offering a free exam and your mailing is going to a neighborhood full of apartments, then it will be a disaster. However, sending it only to the more affluent neighborhoods will probably net you some good patients. So, the rule is: know your audience.

[By the way, I wouldn't ever offer a free cleaning. You'll get patients who have more calculus than teeth and they usually won't want any dentistry you recommend. A free or reduced fee exam is OK for selected audiences but not a free cleaning. We've had a lot of success with offering reduced fee teeth whitening. In fact one of the very best offers we've had our high end or "boutique" type clients use is free teeth whitening, but to get it patients must first receive a full exam and x-rays and teeth cleaning at usual

(not discounted) fees. After that they can get the complimentary whitening. You also have to include a disclaimer such as, "some patients may require urgent care treatment before teeth whitening." This covers you in case the patient's teeth are so bombed out that you can't even fit the bleaching trays.]

Do not let a platitude direct you. Instead, let testing be your guide. Your offer, be it a freebie or a reduced charge, is something to test. Try it on a limited number of households. Then try it the other way. Then see if you're happy with the quantity and quality of patients from each test.

10. About Mailings.

Life is a very patient teacher, it keeps repeating the same lesson until you learn it.

If you plan to mail anything to anybody in any kind of quantities, the following advice will help you. This data is very hard won. It took me years and many dollars to finally get it. There aren't very many people who know what I'm about to tell you.

The single biggest reason for failure when you're sending direct mail is that the pieces never get sent. I will tell you right now that you can expect the post office to dump up to 17% of the mail you give them.

It's a sad fact but, based on my experience, I'm absolutely certain of this.

Many government postal workers don't care a whit about your mail or if it ever arrives. This is especially true of bulk mail because they know that no one will complain that they aren't getting enough "junk" mail. So, it gets dumped. It's like the old Ma Bell slogan popularized on Saturday Night Live, - "We don't care - we don't have to."

What can you do?

This is going to sound paranoid but this is exactly what I do with my own mailings. If you hire a lettershop or mailing service to affix the address labels and do the stuffing and so on, DO NOT allow them to deliver the pieces to the post office. Many of these shops operate at such narrow margins (because people like you and me squeeze them so hard) that the only way they can make any money is to cheat. They will hand you a post

office receipt that says 30,000 pieces got mailed but what they don't tell you is that only 15,000 of them were yours. The other 15,000 belonged to another of their clients, whom the lettershop is also cheating.

Do you see how it works? So have the shop deliver the mailers to you. You then count them and transport them to the post office. Do this even if you're convinced that your lettershop is honest (and there are plenty who are, but why take a chance?).

As to the post office you'll find you have less control over whether they actually mail your pieces, but I do the following with my mailings. Don't use a big, busy post office that has a ton of employees. Find a very non-busy office, even if it's out of town. A small operation is what you want. Go at a non-busy time and meet the people there. Be friendly. Ask questions about bulk mailings as though you don't know how it works. Tell them you're preparing a large mailing and engage in some friendly chitchat but DON'T tell them you're afraid they're going to dump your mail. Just be a nice guy or gal so they will treat you in a like manner. If possible go in several different times and mail some letters or buy stamps or something so they can get familiar with you. Then when you do drop off the pieces make sure you do it yourself. Do not send a staff member. In fact it would be better if both you and your spouse go together.

I have a client who even went a few steps further. He sent all the workers in his local post office cases of a popular micro-brew. This turned out to be a big hit with all of the people in that office. Do you think they'll now dump his mail? It's unlikely.

I know all this sounds weird but what the hell, we want to make sure they get mailed. These little pieces of paper we're entrusting to the post office should each be viewed as actual currency. They are that valuable.

I know you probably won't believe what I've just said - that's fine - just follow my advice anyway. It will both save and make you money.

11. WARNING: Run like hell from anyone who says there's "no risk" in marketing.

It pains me to see people in my field (marketing or practice management consultants) who say things like, "100 new patients per month guaranteed no risk." Please don't fall for this pap.

It's embarrassing to have these people as members of my profession because they are simply and only liars or they haven't had enough experience to know what they're talking about.

Consider this: If marketing were an exact science or a rote procedure that anyone could follow with ease, then every business in this country would be flourishing.

But that's not happening, is it?

To tell someone that a subject (marketing) which contains inherent risks, is in fact risk-less, is unprofessional and is a falsehood.

To use a baseball analogy, in marketing if you do everything right you sometimes hit a home run, but more often than not you simply get some singles and doubles, which is usually more than good enough. But sometimes you strike out completely.

It's maddening but even when you do everything "right" you can still crash.

Results-oriented marketing depends upon testing, tracking what works and what doesn't, being persistent and avoiding stupid mistakes. It has nothing to do with "magic selling formulas" developed by some Johnny-come-lately self-appointed "expert" who has maybe one good idea but a whole passel of untested methods which will waste your money.

The marketplace is brutal and unforgiving. The possibility of failure is high. There is a learning curve and there are very few shortcuts. But in spite of all this, it's still possible to tilt the odds in your favor and win big. Just be real and don't go into it thinking it's without risk.