

Trade Secrets of Corporate Marketing Gurus
Now Revealed to Dentists
by William Howard Horrocks

The gurus are Al Ries and Jack Trout.

They are probably the world's best known marketing strategists. Their books have been published in fifteen languages and they have worked as marketing consultants for many of the most well-known and largest corporations in the world. Their groundbreaking book, *Positioning*, is one of the most brilliant works ever written on the subject of marketing.

One problem. They don't write about dental marketing or even specifically about small professional corporations, such as a dental practice. That is not to say that their work is not applicable to dental marketing, it just takes some work and some dental marketing background to see dentistry through their eyes.

So now, (and with their permission) I'm going to apply the precepts of their book, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing* to the subject of dental marketing. Immutable means unchangeable, so we going to examine some real marketing fundamentals.

1

The Law of Leadership

It's better to be first
than it is to be better.

(Each of these subheadings is a title of a chapter from the book by Ries and Trout.)

Yeah, but how can you be the first dentist in town? Here are some quotes that cast some light on this.

"Many people believe that the basic issue in marketing is convincing prospects that you have a better product or service."

Not true, our gurus assert.

"The basic issue in marketing is creating a category you can be first in. It's the law of leadership. It's better to be first than to be better. It's much easier to get into the mind first than to try to convince someone you have a better product than the one that did get there first."

The authors cite the example of the fame of Charles Lindbergh, the first pilot to fly solo across the Atlantic. Most people know of Lindbergh's exploit, but who has heard of Bert Hinkler, the second pilot to make the same trip? Hinkler even flew faster but that did nothing to make people remember him. So as a dental practice, you can go the Lindbergh route or the Hinkler route. You can be first into the prospects mind (in some category), or you can wait until a market has developed, and then come along and say you're better than the first (and usually best-established) practice in the category. Maybe you are better, but that's not going to matter much because of this simple, powerful truth:

"people tend to stick with what they've got. " (Ibid p. 5)

This could be a potentially grim bit of info were it not for the solution of "recreating a category you can be first in." You can do this. First, re-read chapter 6 on niche marketing and create a category in which you are top dog, the big cheese, numero uno, The Man or The Woman.

(Chapter 2, The Law of the Category, further expounds on the principles in chapter 1, so we'll go on to chapter 3.)

3

The Law of the Mind

It's better to be first in the mind than to
be first in the marketplace.

Yes, it's better to be the first ***into*** the mind, the first to ***enter*** the prospect's mind, than it is to be the first to enter the marketplace. Marketing battles, as Ries and Trout have asserted for years, are won and lost in the prospect's mind, not in the marketplace. So if another practice is the first in town to have air abrasion, but doesn't make this known to the public, then

you come along and call yourself the high-tech dentist who offers dentistry without drills and needles, you can be the first into the prospect's mind in this category.

Of course, this requires advertising, press releases, etc. This would allow you to occupy this "position" in prospects' minds. The above process is an example of "positioning."

"The single most wasteful thing you can do in marketing is try to change a mind." (Ibid, p. 16)

So if there's an established cosmetic practice in your area that owns the position "cosmetic dentistry," then you say, "He's doing well. I, too, shall be a cosmetic dentist," don't be surprised when patients don't beat, as they say, a path to your door.

You need to create a category in which you can be first, and one way to do this is create a sub-category of an existing category. Example: run a series of ads all about veneers, with photos and exciting copy about this recent high-tech breakthrough. By all means, don't use the phrase "cosmetic dentistry" (that's the other guy's position). The ads drive home the concept that veneers allow you to rehabilitate the patient's smile, and that you are the "Smile Rehabilitation Specialist." This is your position, your niche.

But aren't "cosmetic dentistry" and "Smile Rehabilitation Specialist" the same thing? Yes, they are, to you. But not in the mind of the prospect, where marketing battles are won and lost!

Tricky, isn't it?

Now, that's a mighty fine distinction, you may be thinking, and you'd be right. But not too fine a distinction to work. ***So now you don't have to change anybody's mind about who is the best "cosmetic dentist."***

The Law of Perception

Marketing is not a battle of products
it's a battle of perceptions.

This chapter begins with a seemingly obvious statement:

"Many people think marketing is a battle of products [or services, in the case of a dentist]. In the long run, they figure, the best product [or service] will win."

Then they shatter this idea with a viewpoint that's bound to be controversial:

"It's an illusion. There is no objective reality. There are no facts. There are no best products [or services]. All that exists in the world of marketing are perceptions in the minds of customer or prospect. ***The perception is the reality.*** Everything else is an illusion." (Emphasis added)

The authors note that in the United States, Honda is the largest selling Japanese brand, followed by Toyota and Nissan. One would assume that the determining factors were quality, styling and price. These three companies sell the same products in Japan as they do in the United States, but in Japan, Toyota sells about four times as many cars as Honda, even though the quality, styling and price differences are the same.

Why? In Japan, Honda first got into the minds of prospects as a motorcycle company, which is not the best position to hold if you want to sell cars.

Are tooth-colored fillings really more healthful than amalgam fillings? Who knows? But that is the growing perception which must be dealt with. Is Dr. Smith's practice more high-tech than Dr. Jones'? Maybe, maybe not. But if Dr. Smith is the *first into the prospect's mind with the high-tech position*, it's going to be awfully hard to change people's minds about that.

So does this mean that you should create whatever perception you care to in the public's mind, regardless of other factors, such as the truth? Certainly not. In marketing, especially in the medical profession, ethics and integrity are the senior factors, always.

But it does mean that you can't just bank on touting the superiority of your skills or service to make a successful marketing campaign. In marketing, since perception is reality, you must ethically manipulate these perceptions to your marketing advantage.

5

The Law of Focus

The most powerful concept in marketing is owning a word in the prospect's mind.

Xerox owns the word *copier* in the minds of consumers. In the same way, Hershey owns *chocolate bar* and Kleenex owns, well, *Kleenex* (Actually, Kleenex owns the concept of facial tissue so completely that people think of the whole category as *Kleenex*.)

You can also own a word that is an attribute, like Charmin owns the word *soft* in the toilet paper world. What would be some words to own in your local dental world? Comfort gentle, high-tech, friendly, convenient, family, etc.

"If you're not a leader, then your word has to have a narrow focus. Even more important, however, your word has to be available in your category. No one else can have a lock on it."

If you're the leading practice in your area, and you do not face much competition, you can probably get by without much of a focus. But for any other practice, focus is necessary to slice into the mind of the prospect. Focusing on a key word that you wish to own is the primary way to go about this.

If, however, you focus on a word that is either owned by some other practice or is difficult to own, you may not get too far. An example is the word *cosmetic*. Open the phone book in any good-sized city and you'll find many doctors who say that they do cosmetic dentistry, or are even cosmetic specialists. But no one practice comes close to owning the word. If your ad budget was big enough, you could own this word through a virtual

marketing blitzkrieg, but almost no dental practice has an ad budget that big. I once saw a postcard sent out as bulk mail that was spectacularly unfocused. It read "Cosmetic & General Dentistry... Serving all your dental needs." Assuming that prospects would even read past the top line (many would just toss it after identifying it as advertising), most readers would come to this conclusion: ***Oh. He's a dentist - just like most every other dentist... except I don't know him.***

There's more on owning a word in following chapters.

6

The Law of Exclusivity

Two companies cannot own the same word in the prospect's mind.

"When a competitor owns a word or position in the prospect's mind, it is futile to attempt to own the same word."

Let's add in this qualifying factor: it is futile to attempt to own the same word in that market. But the market for a dentist is almost always local, although just what constitutes local can vary from area to area. Seattle, like any big city, is too large for a dentist to be "Seattle 's Family Dentist's." But owning a word for a discrete part of town or a neighborhood is very possible and desirable. Examples would be "West Seattle's Family Dentist," (an attempt to own the word family for West Seattle), "Capitol Hill's Teeth Whitening Specialists," (an attempt to own the word teeth whitening,) or "Magnolia's Comfort Dentistry."

(Chapters 7-8 discuss marketing tactics that I don't feel are readily applicable to dentistry, so we'll skip them).

9

The Law of the Opposite

If you're shooting for second place,
your strategy is determined by the leader.

"In strength there is weakness. Wherever the leader is strong, there is an opportunity for a would-be No. 2 to turn the tables.

Much like a wrestler uses his opponent's strength against him, a company should leverage the leader's strength into a weakness.

If you want to establish a firm foothold on the second rung of the ladder, study the firm above you. Where is it strong? And how do you turn that strength into a weakness?

You must discover the essence of the leader and then present the prospect with the opposite. (In other words, don't try to be better, try to be different.) It's often the upstart versus old reliable."

Ries and Trout then point out that, with respect to choice of product or service, there seem to be two kinds of people: those who want to go to the leader and those who don't want to go to the leader. Of course, if you're not the leaders you want to appeal to the latter group.

Pepsi achieved the bulk of its market share by positioning itself as the choice of younger consumers. This, in turn, re-positioned Coke as the choice of older people. Do you think that these same mechanics don't apply to dental practices?

But it's not just older vs. younger. It's traditional fillings vs. anti-amalgam, it's Old Dentistry vs. New Dentistry, boring waiting rooms vs. video games and Internet. If the leading practice has a huge number of patients, the weakness inherent in that strength is that a patient may have to book weeks in advance, or that the service has become de-personalized due to the heavy patient traffic, or that it's harder for a patient to see the same doctor each time.

All of these factors, and many more, present the non-leading practice with a wealth of marketing opportunities.

10

The Law of Division

Over time, a category will divide and become two or more categories.

This is newsworthy. Remember that the best marketing strategy is to create a category in which you can be the leader. Thus, as the category *dentistry* continues to divide, there are upcoming opportunities for you to accomplish this.

Don't forget that even if you focus on some category, you can still perform other kinds of dentistry. The focus allows your marketing to pierce into the mind of the prospect, and that gets the prospect in the front door. Once that's accomplished, you can do any sort of dentistry you want on that patient.

It's true that this is a particularly difficult precept to actually apply because it requires that you can predict the future. Some years from now, will it be the case that a practice could do only crowns and still prosper? Can a practice market itself as only a TMJ practice and make it? Tough questions, with a lot riding on the answers. The tendency is to answer these kinds of questions with a firm 'maybe', and then continue to market in an unfocused manner. If you do that, you will not become the leader of any category.

11

The Law of Perspective

Marketing effects take place over an extended period of time.

"The long term effects [of a marketing action] are often the opposite of *the short term effects*."

Let's say that you decide to focus your marketing on teeth whitening. So you prepare to deliver the full range of teeth whitening procedures, you change your yellow pages ad to reflect this focus, and put out mailings proclaiming yourself a teeth whitening specialist.

New patient flow decreases, as parents looking for a family dentist pass you by. But, as your marketing continues to trumpet your new focus, patients begin to show up for teeth whitening. Of course, you educate them so they realize that they need a lot of other dentistry, as well. This starts to push the income up. It may take less than a year, or maybe more than a year, but the time comes when you are the leader in a category you created and your practice's growth attains a terrific momentum.

It's also true that many other factors have to be in line, also. You have to run a solid, professional practice. Just calling yourself a teeth whitening specialist, or calling yourself anything is, by itself, no guarantee of success.

(Chapters 12 and 13 are not readily applicable to most practices, so I'll move on.)

14

The Law of Attributes

For every attribute, there is an opposite, effective attribute.

Ries and Trout:

"In Chapter 6 (The Law of Exclusivity) we made the point that you can't own the same word or position that your competitor owns. You must find your own word to own. You must seek out another attribute.

Too often a company attempts to emulate the leader. "They must know what works," goes the rationale, "so let's do something similar." Not good thinking.

It's much better to search for an opposite attribute that will allow you to

play off against the leader. The key word here is *opposite* - similar won't do.

Marketing is a battle of ideas. So if you are to succeed, you must have an idea or attribute of your own to focus your efforts around. Without one, you had better have a low price. A very low price.

Some say all attributes are not created equal. Some attributes are more important to customers than others. You must try and own the most important attribute."

The authors conveniently use brands of toothpaste to make their point. The top four best-selling brands are Crest, Aim, Ultra-Brite and Close-up. Each of these has focused on one attribute in their marketing:

Crest..... fights cavities

Aim..... tastes good

Ultra-Brite..... whitens teeth

Close-up..... freshens breath

What would happen if one of these brands decided to broaden their appeal and go after more of the market? Crest could say, "Fights cavities and tastes great!" I don't think their sales would start tumbling or anything, but it *would* be a dilution of their core position. And since "fights cavities" is the best attribute to own, why mess with it? And remember, these are the top-selling brands - it's not an accident that they each focus on one attribute. There are scads of other brands, but none of them has found or created a category in which they can be the leader. (With the exception of Menta-Dent, which is the leader in the new, but smaller, category, baking soda toothpaste.)

So what attributes can a dental practice claim and try to own? I'm sure you can think of a bunch. High-tech, friendly/caring, painless/gentle, convenient, health-conscious, kid-oriented. See Chapter 6 on niche marketing for a more detailed rundown.

The Law of Candor

When you admit a negative, the prospect will give you a positive.

"It goes against human nature to admit a problem. For years, the power of positive thinking has been drummed into us. "Think positive" has been the subject of endless books and articles.

So it may come as a surprise to you that one of the most effective ways to get into a prospect's mind is to first admit a negative and then twist it into a positive."

'Avis is only No. 2 in rent-a-cars.'

'With a name like Smucker's, it has to be good.'

'The 1970 VW will stay ugly longer.'

'Joy. The most expensive perfume in the world.'

What's going on here? Why does a dose of honesty work so well in the marketing process?

First and foremost, candor is very disarming. Every negative statement you make about yourself is instantly accepted as truth. Positive statements, on the other hand are looked at as dubious at best. Especially in an advertisement."

Here's something a dentist might say:

We give you very individualized service because we care about you and value you as an important individual.

Here's the same idea, only preceded by the admission of a negative:

We are not a large, well-known practice. Because of that, we are able to spend the extra time needed to listen to each patient's concerns and to give you the kind of personalized attention we think a patient wants.

Which is the most believable?
Isn't learning about marketing fun?

What if you were looking through the yellow pages and you saw this headline:

"I HATE GOING TO THE DENTIST..."

I think most people would be drawn to this unusual ad. The ad would then continue:

"...and I'm a dentist myself! That's right, I'm also a patient, and even with recent dental advances like Air Abrasion (which can make drills and shots unnecessary), painless injections and a friendly and caring doctor and staff, I'd really rather be somewhere else.

So I really understand what it's like to be a patient. As a result I've done everything I can to make your visit as comfortable and pleasant as possible..." (etc.)

This approach is more believable because of the admission of the negatives wouldn't you agree?

(I'm going to skip Chapters 16-22 because, like, it's my book and that's what I want to do. So there.)

To get the full impact of Ries and Trout's powerful ideas, read the whole book, and also their first book, a Positioning. It's published by Harper Business, 10 E. 53rd St., New York, NY, 10022.