

Destroy those common marketing myths
Marketing your practice should come first and forget about reduced-rate
coupon advertising!

by Rodger 'Rod' Kurthy, DMD & Howie Horrocks

As a practicing dentist, I have learned the perils of marketing my practice through years of trial and error. Nothing seemed to give me a good return on the time and money I invested until I met Howie Horrocks, a marketing professional who specializes in helping dentists to achieve their growth potential.

With Howie's excellent advice and my experience as a dentist, I have finally found marketing techniques that really work in my practice. In fact, the incredible results have motivated me so much, I have just completed a new book dedicated to dental marketing.

Here are some of the common myths and problems my friend Howie and I have found in discussing marketing techniques with other dentists.

One of the most common problems dentists have in implementing marketing programs is they think about it AFTER everything else-building, equipment and staff have already been put in place. Suddenly, they are faced with the question... *Where are the new patients going to come from?*

Dentists spend time in school to become very proficient in dental procedures. They spend a considerable amount of time checking out contractors and determining what equipment to purchase. When they start to think of attracting patients often the first question they ask is. "What kind of offer do you suggest for my postcards? What coupons should I have? What freebies can I offer?"

Quite frankly, this type of thinking is exactly backwards. Rather than asking, "what can I give away?" you should be asking, "how can I make my practice THE place to solve real people's dental problems?" Trust me, you don't want bargain hunters. You should be looking for patients who want solutions to their problems. If you can solve their everyday problems, they will gladly pay your fee.

Your marketing really has to prove to them that you are aware of their problems and KNOW how to solve them right away.

Developing and implementing this type of marketing will take time and work on your part but there is NOTHING more important than having the 'right kind' of patients coming to you. Here's a few ideas to get you started.

Location Determines Practice Type

The first decision you must make is deciding what is most important to you - to be located in a specific geographic location or to develop a certain type of practice. If you're very lucky, sometimes these two things might fit together but more often this is not the case.

Some dentists want to practice in their hometown. But what if the income level is very low and managed care is mainstream? If you MUST practice there, then resign yourself to the fact you will be treating people with very limited incomes. You will probably be doing a lot of managed care, so learn to do it well. Your challenge will be to learn what oral health problems these people experience every day. Only then can you develop a marketing strategy that will be effective. Remember, people make decisions based on their own incentives.

Perhaps you're a dentist who really enjoys high-end cosmetic dentistry and would like to have a full fee-for-service practice with no managed care. To be successful, you will have to do a lot of homework to find a location with socio-economic indicators that show it can actually support your desired type of practice.

Make Yourself Marketable

Once you have established where your practice will be located, the next step is to let potential patients know you're in their neighborhood. Don't begin to rely on special offers or 'freebies' to bring in new patients. You may decide on special 'offers' to provide patients with an incentive to visit your office right away but that should NEVER be the only reason they want to come to you.

First, do a bit of research and find out what oral conditions seem prevalent in your community and what people have done so far to treat their ailments. I have found a few problems that seem to be universal such as frequent painful canker sores; embarrassing unsightly cold sores; sensitive teeth that hurt simply breathing in cold air, stains that remain after a cleaning; having a tooth break and then being told they will now need a root canal and crown; the sound and feel of the vibrating drill; gagging when the dentist takes an impression; having crooked teeth, but not wanting braces; fear that their child will have a tooth knocked out playing sports; being told they have gum disease and are afraid of the treatment; fear of losing teeth in the future; being kept awake by a spouse that snores; worrying they might have bad breath; having a chapped, cracked lip that just won't heal; having loose or uncomfortable dentures or wanting cosmetic dentistry but worrying the results will look bad.

You must learn how to treat these types of problems and then ADDRESS their concerns in your marketing. Learn what you can say to prove to people you really care about them and their problems and KNOW how to fix them. You need to find ways to further endorse your credibility as proof of your claims. You must convince new patients that you are the best of the best and a literal 'star' among other dentists. Do all this, and you'll have great new patients coming in by the bus load.

Problem Solving 101

Let's consider the problem of tooth sensitivity. It's estimated that one in four patients has some form of dental hyper-sensitivity. That means most families have at least one member with this concern.

Here's how I address sensitivity concerns within my marketing. I ask the question, "Do You Have Sensitive Teeth? If you or one of your family members has sensitivity to cold foods or drinks, sweets, acidic fruit, the touch of a tooth with the toothbrush, or simply sensitivity when you even breathe in cold air, we can help. Dr. Kurthy has been frustrated about dentistry's inability to adequately treat sensitive teeth. He has searched for the answer for years, and has now discovered an incredible treatment that is quick, easy, and only takes seconds to apply. You may have read a

magazine article by Dr. Kurthy about this topic. Give us a call - we want to help!"

Honestly, it's as simple as that - just address their problems with a solution and boost their confidence by reassuring them that YOU can eliminate their problems! Now just imagine their reaction if you went on to address another five emotional topics mentioned previously that you can solve, WOW... you won't believe their reaction! Don't stop with reaching just the general public, let's focus on the skill of attracting patients you really want to become part of your practice.

Getting the Word Out

Next consider how to deliver your message. I personally have found that direct mail is the most effective. You'll also need to consider the kind of photographs and colors to use. Most importantly, you must find out what will make someone open up your marketing piece and actually read it.

First, understand you are marketing to moms because they are the ones that usually choose the family dentist. So, how do you get mom's attention? What kind of headline do you need to use? Do you print something like "Don't Open This!" on the front cover to create curiosity? Or do you appeal to her fears by saying something like, "We Cater To Cowards"? Actually, getting mom to notice your marketing is a bit more complicated.

Moms love family and there's nothing better than a photo of a family to catch her attention. Consider having nice pictures of 'real' people in your mailer. People like to look at people, especially women (moms). Make the colors in your mailer something that will appeal to a typical mom like soft blue, clouds or pastels.

Your mailer should include a paragraph about each dental problem you can solve. Include as many as you can into the piece and don't be afraid to use lots of words. Many 'marketing experts' will tell you to "keep it short because people don't like to read." From our experience, we just don't buy that line. GOOD patients, the type that care about themselves and their families, DO want to know as much as possible about the dentist that will

treat them. If someone isn't interested in what you have to say they won't read ANYTHING you send them. However, if they ARE interested or even only SLIGHTLY interested, they will want to know as much as possible about you. Giving them only scant information will practically guarantee they won't call you.

You're Not Finished Yet

Once your mailer is written, there are many other crucial decisions you must make. Although there isn't adequate space here to include everything, here are some of the decisions you'll have to make to begin an effective marketing campaign. Where do you have the mailer printed? How many should you print? How do you obtain a mailing list? Who will assemble the mailing to comply with postal regulations? How much is all this going to cost? How do you get the very cheapest bulkrate mailing costs? When should you mail? Should you change your mailer each time? Should you provide offers, and if so, what kind? And how are you going to track the effectiveness of your efforts?

All of these considerations don't have to be complicated, with a bit of homework you can easily find the answers to these questions or find a competent company to execute a plan specifically tailored to your needs. The most important part of any marketing plan is understanding the wants, needs and desires of people in your community and how YOU can help them.

If you want to read about the experiences of other real-world dentists and how they have executed their marketing plans, go to the most active dental community on the Internet, www.dentaltown.com, and do a search on the message boards for marketing. With so many different demographics and different ideas, I'm sure you'll find information that will help you develop an effective plan for your next marketing project.