

## **MARKETING YOUR PRACTICE MORE EFFECTIVELY**

**Sandy Brown, Director of Marketing and Sales at Denplan, offers his advise on how dentists can make their practice marketing more effective, to both attract new patients and retain existing ones.**

Dental practitioners can't afford to sit back and be complacent, especially in this period of recession. They need to recognise that they are business owners and managers as well as professional health practitioners. Like any commercial business, their practice needs to make sure that it hangs on to its existing customers and attracts new ones.

In these touch economic times it is likely that you might need to review your practice expenditure and think about where you could make savings. Focussing on your marketing strategy to make sure it is working for you efficiently can really pay dividends and now is the perfect time to start.

Getting the basics right will help you to make your marketing more effective. Whether you want to attract new patients to your practice or to communicate with existing ones who haven't visited you for a while, here are a few top tips to get your marketing plan started:

### **Know your patients**

Your first priority when reviewing your marketing is knowing whether you are getting a return on your investment. The secret to this is making sure you have an effective monitoring system in place, so you can record how people hear about you. This will also give you a good idea on where to focus your marketing activity in the future and where your current patients are likely to see your latest news.

Understand who your patients are, where they live, what they do, what they like, when they like it. It will make your relationship more successful and enable you to target your marketing efforts more effectively. One of the easiest ways to find out this type of information is to ask your patients to complete a simple questionnaire. Knowing what matters to your current patients means you can focus on shaping your practice to address their priorities and on communicating what you offer to them more efficiently.

### **Increase contact**

Whenever you prepare to communicate with your patients or potential new ones, it is important to avoid the trap of just talking about how wonderful you are. Instead, it is vital you think about what you are trying to say and what benefits you are offering. Always ask yourself, “what’s in it for them?” and “what will they get out of a visit to our practice?”

Increasing contact between you and your patients will strengthen your importance and make them feel valued, so don’t leave it six months until your next contact. If time permits, send out a newsletter as this is a great way of reminding them of the benefits of preventive dental care and informing them of your services.

It is also good practice to ensure that your patients are given every opportunity to book their next six month examination at the end of their current visit. You could then follow this up with a reminder telephone call, text message or letter before their appointment, as this emphasises how valuable their appointment is and avoid lapsed appointments. It is also important to remember that lapsed patients can be reactivated. You could send patients that you have not examined for over a year a personalised letter reminding them why they need regular oral health checks and telling them they are due for one.

Another way of increasing contact with your patients is by sending post-treatment letters. This will make them feel cared for and remind them of the value of the treatment they have received. You could even give patients a call to find out if they are OK after having particularly evasive treatment. It is these little touches that will set you apart from your competition and ensure you retain your patients.

### **Be human – be you**

Don't put on airs and graces or use fancy language in your marketing. This can not only be confusing at times, but can alienate potential patients. Never forget, one of the most effective forms of marketing is through personal recommendation and this will not happen if your patients feel they don't understand you. Try to write as you speak and explain things in a clear and concise manner, while still being friendly and approachable. By building a great rapport with your current patients they may be more likely to recommend you to like-minded friends and even provide you with one or two names and addresses so you can contact these potential clients.

### **Find the right spot**

Alternatively, you may need to spread your net a little wider. Think about the best location to get your message across to patients, either for an advert promoting your practice or for your practice marketing literature. Where are they most likely to see your message? This could be in the local paper, in your practice newsletter, on the surgery notice-board, outside the surgery, or via email or on the internet. Again, knowing your patients can help you decide. If your best customers are retired over-65-year-old couples, placing leaflets featuring pretty young people in your local gym is probably not the best way to go!

Many potential patients will use the web, so ensure you have a website. Some dental payment plan specialists offer advice on quick, easy and cost effective ways to create a website. Also, for people to find you on the internet, you need to be seen on search engines listings such as Google and Yahoo. To find out how accessible you are, log onto a search engine and try searching for a dental practice in your area. If you are not easy to find, you might want to invest in 'search optimisation' or do some banner advertising.

### **Create partnerships**

To enhance your offering even further, why not aim to develop partnerships with other local businesses? For example, an optician in your area may offer your patients a free eye test, if you offered their customers a free new patient consultation. Joint marketing campaigns such as this provide you with access to another patient base and a recommendation from a professional they trust, as well as potentially doubling your audience.

Large employers offer their staff benefits and they have an interest in making sure that they are dentally fit. You could contact a large employer to offer your services to their staff. Once you have got them interested it is likely that they will ask you for information for their Staff Intranet.

If you offer cosmetic dental procedures then ask if you can place promotional leaflets in local beauty salons, hairdressers etc. You could reward staff for their recommendations. A satisfied patient is always a good promotion, particularly when the treatment changes someone's appearance such as tooth whitening or orthodontics. You could therefore offer your staff, or staff from other businesses complimentary treatments so that it will encourage them to talk about their experience.

### **Measure what you do**

Getting your marketing efforts right can deliver important cost benefits for your business. Find out how successful your marketing efforts are by monitoring the number of patients who think positively about you, who ring you or come in, or who have a particular treatment as a result of your marketing. However, if you are not getting the outcome you want, stop and try a new approach. If you spend £1000 on advertising, do it on the basis that you will get a return on investment. If you do not get this, then the money you've spent is wasted.

It's clear that understanding what your current patients look for in a dental practice is key to winning their loyalty. It can also help you target potential new patients more effectively and ensure you get more impact from your marketing spend. Some payment plan specialists also offer tailor-made training days, which are specific to your practice's needs and can incorporate a module focused on marketing your practice, as well as offering verifiable CPD.

**Notes to Editors:**

**About Denplan**

Denplan Limited, part of the AXA Group, is the UK's leading dental payment plan specialist. There are more than 6,500 member dentists nationwide treating over 1.8 million Denplan registered patients. Established in 1986 by two dentists who pioneered the concept of dental payment plans, Denplan has been in the heart of dental care for over 22 years. Today, Denplan arranges a range of plans for adults and children, enabling patients to spread the cost of their dental care through a fixed monthly fee. Denplan supports regular attendance and preventive care, reducing the need for clinical intervention and helping patients to maintain healthy teeth and gums for life.

Patient enquiries telephone: 0800 401 402

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Denplan also provides a range of professional services for its member dentists, including the Denplan Quality Programme, Denplan Excel accreditation programme and Denplan Training.

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**About AXA**

AXA is a world leader in financial protection. AXA's operations are diverse with major operations in Western Europe, North America and the Asia/Pacific area. AXA employs 110,000 staff and reported total revenues for the full year 2006 of €79 billion, underlying earnings of €4,010 million and had €1,315 billion in assets under management as of 31 December 2006. Our previous company performance is not a guide to how we may perform in the future.

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