

RECESSION PROOFING YOUR PRACTICE

Sandy Brown offers his advice on how dentists can make their practice marketing more effective in the current economic climate:

In these tough financial times it is likely that you will be reviewing your practice expenditure and thinking about where you could make savings. Focusing on your marketing strategy to make sure it is delivering 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 remind existing ones who haven't visited for a while, I have included a few top tips below to get your marketing plan started:

Know your patients

Your first priority when reviewing your marketing is to know 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 when, where and how people heard about you. This will also give you a good idea of where and when to focus your marketing activity in the future.

It is also important that your practice team are well trained in customer service and your sales and feedback processes, for example, taking a new patient enquiry and turning it into a firm appointment or cross selling further treatments.

Recommendations

One of the most effective ways to increase your patient numbers is by word-of-mouth. Remember, a word-of-mouth recommendation is worth more than any advertisement and will attract like-minded people to your practice. Therefore you need to make sure you are doing everything you can to keep your current patients satisfied.

Simply encouraging your patients to recommend your practice to their friends, family and work colleagues can be very beneficial and offering an incentive can really enhance this. You could offer incentives such as a half price or free initial consultation, but be sure to acknowledge patients who recommend you with either a thank you card and/or a practice gift-voucher for dental products or money off.

Increase contact

Increasing contact between you and your patients will make them feel valued and strengthen your relationship, 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 your patients 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 avoids 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 overdue 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 also 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.

Make your practice more attractive

Because you see your practice every day it can be all too easy not to notice its wear and tear. Try to make the most of your practice by continuing to invest in it and keep it updated. Creating a pleasant environment and maintaining facilities to the standard you would expect in a first class business will help convey the quality of treatment you offer to your patients.

Also, ensure your patients are aware of the services offered within your practice and any positive changes that improve their comfort and care. For example, new computers, digital x-rays or an intra-oral camera can show that you are an up-to-date practice but without losing that personal feel.

As you know, offering patients the chance to spread the cost of their oral health by monthly payments may also ease their financial burden. Therefore, you could renew your efforts to secure patients to the practice with a dental payment plan. This will not only secure you a consistent income, but will also allow your patients to more effectively budget for their treatment.

Have a consistent brand

You should ensure that all your written communication, marketing literature, signage and practice branded items, all have a consistent image. This creates the right impression and reflects quality and professionalism. Have you thought about offering practice branded bags to put the dental products in that you sell? By making sure that all branded items carry your contact details and website address, it also acts as an additional promotion for you.

You should also use your signage to exploit the visibility of your practice from the road, making sure it says 'new patients welcome'. Temporary or seasonal visual effects can also attract attention from passer-bys, for example, plants, lights, blinds, banners and posters. Having the backing of and support of a nationally recognised brand that your patients will know and trust will also give your practice that extra edge.

Find the right spot

Alternatively, you may need to spread your net a little wider. Think about the best time, place and method 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 or magazine, in your practice newsletter, on the surgery notice-board, outside the surgery, in other local businesses, or via email or on the internet.

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.

It is clear that making your marketing work for you is especially worth reviewing, especially in this period of economic downturn. By following the steps above you are far more likely to target potential new patients more effectively and ensure you get more impact from your marketing spend.

Notes to Editors:

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