



Introduction to Marketing for Dental Practices



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What Is Marketing?

A common marketing mistake that dental practices make is limiting their efforts to one method or approach and believing this is a complete marketing strategy. Successful practices complete a variety of marketing activities and create multiple avenues for patients to find them and engage in services on an ongoing basis.

The most successful practices allow for distinct differences in their approaches to public relations (PR), marketing, advertising, and promotion.

Definitions

Term	Definition
PR	“Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” (PRSA 2012)
Marketing	“Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” (AMA 2013)
Advertising	The act or practice of calling public attention to a product or service, especially by paid announcements in newspapers and magazines, over radio or television, on billboards, online, etc.
Promotion	Methods or techniques such as highlighting benefits, offering discounts, providing free samples, giving gifts or incentives to a purchaser, etc. in order to create public acceptance of or interest in a product. Promotion is usually done in addition to other techniques such as advertising or personal selling.

It is also important to distinguish between internal and external marketing, the purpose of each, and the time and attention required for these actions to be successful in a practice.

Term	Definition
Internal Marketing	The generation of referrals from satisfied patients and others who recommend that friends, family members, and others engage in services with the practice.
External Marketing	Marketing activities that involve the practice reaching out to the public via web-based marketing, direct mail, signage, print ads, radio, television, regional outreach, mobile, and other marketing outlets to make potential patients aware of the practice and why it is the best choice for their care.

It is important to scrutinize the cost of each marketing action to ensure a return on the investment. However, it is equally or more important to execute a marketing plan based on the volume of communication and outreach rather than only focusing on the specific details of one type of activity and expecting it to attract and retain all the new patients the practice needs.

Ownership & Responsibilities

When doctors/owners are responsible for various management aspects of their practice, they generally believe they can delegate most of the administrative responsibilities, and rightly so. It's simply impossible for a doctor to tend to the clinical needs of patients and also act as a full-time executive and/or administrator for the practice. However, for marketing, the doctor's/owner's initial and continued involvement is key for positive results. After all, the doctor is the face of the practice and crucial part of the practice's image.

The doctor/owner should be heavily involved in the initiation of their practice's marketing strategy and should continue to be lightly present throughout the continued process. If more time is spent at the beginning to fully define the practice's image and message, then a system can be built for staff to repeat and align that message with all practice activities.

The doctor/owner can lead their marketing strategy by

- Defining the expectations for the strategy and the desired results
- Assigning responsibilities and ownership of the activities and results
- Using a marketing calendar to ensure marketing efforts are adequate and aligned with the needs of the practice
- Ensuring staff is given sufficient time to dedicate to marketing activities
- Implementing a tracking system to easily see the amount of marketing being done at any given time and how it impacts the new patient flow over time.

- Allotting time to oversee marketing activities on a routine and dependable basis (e.g., weekly marketing meetings, time built into staff meetings for marketing, etc.)
- Compensating staff members with bonuses, rewards, and other incentives when their marketing efforts result in an increased new patient flow.

It is up to the doctor/owner to establish the marketing strategy to create the right voice and image for their practice, but the office manager is responsible for executing the marketing strategy. For this reason, it is very important that the office manager have experience, training, or education in the field of marketing.

It should be recognized that all employees have three jobs within the office. They are expected to perform the duties related to

- Their own position
- Being a positive and productive member of the team
- The essential marketing actions that keep the practice growing and viable

Budget

For a general dental practice, the marketing budget should be 4-5% of the practice's income. Internal marketing should be the first priority, as it

- Is the cheapest marketing—it only requires about 1% of the budget
- Attracts higher quality patients who have been referred and already have a more positive view of the practice and the need for treatment

The remaining 3-4% of the budget should then be spent on external marketing.

Once the doctor/owner and office manager have determined the marketing budget, a marketing calendar should be created to determine what will be done, in what prioritized order, and with what frequency based on the budget and immediate needs of the practice.

Getting Started

Step 1: Determine Target Market

Who is your target audience? In other words, who are the customers most likely to visit your practice? This may include specific age groups, genders, income levels, and other factors.

The office manager should look back over at least three years of new patient information to determine

- Who have you been attracting as new patients?
- How did they hear about you?
- What did they come to you for?

They can then compare this data with the fees you've been collecting for the most frequently completed services to see what is actually happening in the practice. From there, you can decide if you'd like to continue with the current pattern or change the emphasis of your marketing efforts to attract and provide care for a different type of patient and clinical or cosmetic need.

Step 2: Conduct Surveys

Doctors and office managers may believe they know why their patients prefer their practice: it's their location, hours, doctors, or insurance program. Though this could be true, there could be other factors influencing your patients' decision to use your practice, and it's important to hear it straight from them to really understand what is working well for your practice.

Surveys should be conducted extensively with existing patients, potential patients in your target market, and potential patients in a different target market (if you want to attract different patients for new/different services).

For existing patients, you could ask

- How they heard about you
- What made them decide to make an appointment
- How they were influenced to follow through with treatment
- What they like most about the practice
- What you could improve
- What you could offer to better meet their needs

You could ask potential patients

- What kind of help they need
- What would motivate them to visit your practice

- How your practice could make it easier for them to complete their treatments

Once you have completed several surveys for each group, examine the results to find common themes in their answers. You can then use these themes to promote the most influential aspects of your practice. Knowing what your patients and potential patients want and need from your practice will help you know which “key words” to use in your marketing to get their attention. The best way to develop your message is by using your patients’ words and experiences, as those will resonate with other like-minded patients.

Step 3: Track Practice Health, Stability, and Expansion

In the United States, practices lose about 8-10% of their patient base annually through normal attrition. It’s just a fact of life that people leave practices for a number of reasons. However, the inflow of new patients must replace those lost patients for the practice to maintain itself. For the practice to grow, the number of new patients must be greater than the number of lost patients. This is where your marketing efforts come in.

In order to track and measure the health, stability, and expansion of your practice, you must review the number of active patients to understand how many patients your practice currently has and has had over time. Depending on the practice, an “active” patient is one who has received maintenance or restorative treatment within the last 18 months.

Accurately tracking the number of active patients will show if the practice is growing, maintaining, or declining. Comparing the number to the same month the year before naturally adjusts for anomalies such as seasonal declines and large, occasional cases.

To understand the importance of tracking active patients, consider this example: A practice believes they have around 10,000 patients because they have 10,000 patient records. But when they explore the data further to understand how many *active* patients they have, they discover that they in fact only have 4,000 patients who have been seen *in the last 18 months*. This is a significant difference that is important to be aware of considering that not only is this number less than half of what the practice thought, but 8-10% of these patients will also be lost due to natural attrition. Additionally, marketing efforts will have to replace these lost patients with new patients just for the practice to maintain itself.

Create a detailed log for all of your new patients over the last two years, including categories for how they heard about you. You may find that you don’t have adequate records to complete this level of analysis, but it will also show you what information your practice should track going forward. Your dental software should allow for each new patient to be easily recorded including this information.

The most common new patient categories are slightly different for each practice, but you might include the following:

- **Insurance:** referred as provider for patient's insurance
- **Referral:** referred by an existing patient
- **Signage:** saw the practice's building or sign
- **Online:** found online through a professional listing, website, review, social media, etc.
- **Networking:** sent by another practice or affiliated business
- **Outsourcing:** referred by a service paid for by the practice (such as 1-800 Dentist)

Determine the percentage of new patients in each category to see

- which categories bring in the most new patients and, therefore, which you should focus the most time and money.
- changes that need to be made if your patients are coming from an ineffective source (such as an insurance plan that pays inadequate reimbursements).
- which areas you can target in your marketing efforts to enhance new patient flow from areas that are not contributing proportionately (e.g., if your analysis reflects no or few patient referrals, you can make that focus a priority).

Step 4: Evaluate Your Insurance Decision

While premiums have gone up for patients over time due to inflation and economic factors, policy maximum annual payouts have remained constant or similar for decades, and reimbursement rates are at the lowest percentage of actual practice fees in history. For this reason, choosing to participate in insurance plans is a personal choice for each practice owner.

If you choose to accept insurance or participate in plans, analyze this decision and determine if your continued participation is beneficial for the practice and why. This will help you determine how to communicate your insurance acceptance policy with your patients and prospective patients.

If you decide to build on the patient insurance portion of your practice, look at your patient data to determine which patients use which insurance. From there, you can determine how to get more patients who are covered by your premium insurers. You can ask patients with this coverage to refer family members, as mentioned earlier, but you can also ask those patients to refer colleagues (who are likely to have the same insurance coverage). If you have multiple patients from one large, local employer, you can contact the company's human resources department. If you offer a discount or even simplify the process for their employees, some companies will add information about your practice to new employee welcome/benefits packets or send your information out to existing employees in an effort to promote benefits.

You can also contact insurance companies to maximize your exposure as one of their participants. Find out how they promote participating practices in your area, and ensure your information is included in benefits/provider booklets, online listings, etc.

Step 5: Get Creative

Have an Open House

Open houses are most commonly associated with a new practice opening or ownership or location changes, but you can get great results from having an open house any time *if you plan far enough in advance*. Choose a date about six months out, and choose one that does not coincide with busy summer activities, end-of-the-year holidays, or other times that are known to conflict with family or community events.

Secure a few groups to attend, like other practices or businesses in your network, your business neighbors, friends and family members of your staff, companies whose employees are your patients, etc. It's also important to include some leaders in the industry or community, like neighborhood associations, well-regarded town officials, etc. Then, start inviting your patients. Send mail invitations to all your active and inactive patients. As the date nears, send a second mail invitation to your active patients, and follow up with a third invitation via e-mail.

Post information about the event in your waiting room and operatories, on the home page of your website, on social media, and on a large sign outside the practice (perhaps on the building or lawn where passersby can easily see the details).

Serve food and publicize that you will do so. In fact, you can promote the event as a barbeque and serve food in the parking lot if the weather and/or facility allows.

While it is a good idea to have some educational material available and stations people can visit or see demonstrations about simple procedures (patients usually show interest in easy cosmetic procedures like bleaching), the event should not center only on this. This is a PR event designed to introduce the practice to the community.

Show Your Support

Show people that you are an active part of their community and how your practice supports their community's needs. When people associate you with "help" and "care" in a wholesome way, they will become more trusting of you and your recommendations for their dental health.

If you've sponsored a sports team, make a poster about their season and success. If you participated in a community event, make a slideshow so attendees can see your engagement in

the activity. Announce your next community campaign (holiday toy drive, food donation, run for health awareness, etc.), and have a sign-up station to garner support.

You can also plan and sponsor an upcoming event (free first aid/CPR certification, park clean up, school playground improvement) and register people for it.

You can also use this event to promote your commitment to providing the best possible care for all who need it in the community.

- Promote the extended hours you offer to make appointments convenient for patients.
- Discuss the financial assistance you provide (like taking a variety of insurances, billing insurance for patients, using 3rd party financing, offering the lowest possible fees, etc.).
- Provide a “scholarship” and make it known that you will take one case per month (or quarter) for someone who can’t afford needed treatment.
- Stress any location advantages (parking, public transportation, near high-use areas).
- Commit to a high level of continuing education to maintain and enhance the skill level and variety of services you can offer patients.
- Provide samples and items for attendees (e.g., a small box or bag with a toothbrush, toothpaste, floss and other fun items, plus your business card).

The only limit to the number of approaches and external marketing activities your practice can use is your own imagination and persistence. Experiment with a variety of marketing actions to hone in on what works best. Meticulously document each action and campaign and watch for change.

Use time as another factor for your marketing methods. Once you determine how long it takes for certain actions to have an impact, all you have to do is measure how positive, negative, or non-impactful the action is, and you’ll isolate the formula and combination of successful marketing actions for your practice.

Keep in mind that you’ll want to use multiple avenues in varying quantities that flow outward from the practice to reach, acknowledge, and compel patients through communication.

Once you try multiple methods and strategies and find what works, stop experimenting and don’t make any additional changes—stick with what gets results. If results decrease, you can start making slight adjustments to get things back to the level of new patient flow you desire.

Specific Marketing Avenues

While it is important and valuable to experiment to keep things fresh and innovative, it is necessary to cover all of the following areas at the minimum:

Internal Marketing

Internal or referral-based marketing can be the least expensive and most effective means of growing a practice. At only 1-2% of your total budget, internal marketing should be your first step when developing your marketing strategy as it also makes up about 80% of a general practice's marketing efforts and is the biggest generator of new patients.

Although internal marketing is less expensive in cost, it requires more and consistent doctor and staff efforts for interactions with existing patients and other affiliates. Additionally, it is often necessary to jump start the referral process and take proactive steps to get follow through and on referrals.

Be sure to keep track of how many new patients you garner from your internal marketing efforts, and reward your staff for effective efforts.

Patient Family Referrals

A great place to start is with a patient's family. Ask the patient who his or her spouse and children are seeing for dental care, and let them know that you can get the entire family scheduled. If their family members have insurance, let the patient know that their spouse and kids can receive a free exam and cleaning. If they do not have insurance, let the patient know you'll offer a deep discount to their family members for an exam and cleaning.

Patient family referrals can be the most neglected source of new patients for a general dental practice. Consider what one patient will spend on care in your practice over a lifetime, and consider what you *don't* have to pay in marketing costs to acquire these new patients. Plus, these types of referrals tend to stay with the practice longer and have higher engagement for treatment and maintenance over time.

Other Patient Referrals

Most patients are happy with the care and service you provide and would gladly recommend you to a friend, family member, or coworker. Take the time to go over patient satisfaction levels, patient survey results, online reviews, etc. to get additional referrals.

National studies show that over half of your public is not getting the level of care they should. These people aren't going to the dentist for a reason, but when they decide to (or have to due

to an emergency caused by neglect), they are most likely to choose a practice based on hearing about a positive experience from a trusted colleague, friend or family member.

How to Implement a Referral Program

Get Your Team On Board

Have a meeting with your team to inform them that the practice is starting to address its marketing techniques. Marketing can be a misunderstood and emotional subject for many people, including some of your team members. We have all had various experiences with marketing as consumers and as members of other practices, and these experiences could give some a negative opinion about marketing in general. It's important to try to offset any negative feelings they may have through open communication so your staff is reassured, comfortable, and engaged.

Also make your team aware of the fact that the average practice loses 8-10% of their patients every year from natural attrition (due to a move, change of insurance, death, etc.). Explain that in order to stay in operation, the practice must, at a minimum, replace these lost patients. In order to grow, the practice must attract even more new patients, and new patients are gained through marketing. Giving your team this information to show the importance and value of marketing will go a long way in gaining their acceptance, trust, and participation.

There are two important steps for implementation of a successful referral program:

- You must develop a short, genuine, and comfortable way to talk about the purpose of your practice and who you help as the most important part of your referral dialog—otherwise, your team won't feel comfortable talking about the referral program with patients. For training purposes, it is important to help your team understand that a referral program will only be effective if the team members are communicating correctly and routinely with patients about it.
- Use referral cards to enhance the dialogue and serve as a reminder and motivator for patients to follow through and make a referral. With referral cards, the more you get out, the higher your odds will be for success, so your team must work together to effectively get as many cards out to patients as possible. The more conversations you have with your patients about referrals, the more conversations they will have with others and, ultimately, the more new patients you will receive.

What to Say: the Referral Dialog

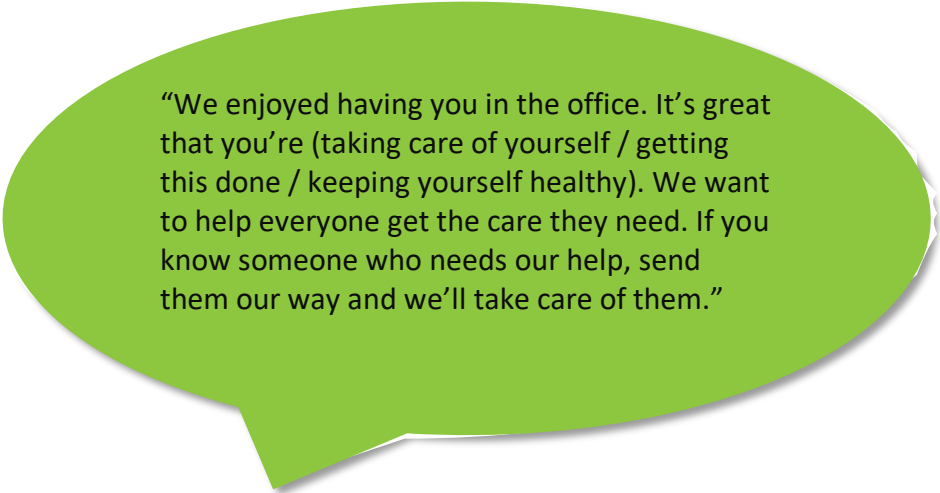
Here are some key points to include in your dialog:

- Start by telling the patient you enjoyed having them in the office. If someone is thanking you or expressing satisfaction, you can acknowledge what's being said and easily move

the conversation over to your appreciation for them coming in (state it with the focus of the patient and the care and away from the team members or practice). If you want to initiate the conversation on referrals, this is a great way to easily and naturally bring it up. It's a use of good manners that patients don't hear often enough, and they respond well to this approach.

- Tell the patient how important it is and what a good job they have done by taking care of this. Though you may see these procedures as routine, to your patients they may seem unnecessary, costly, intimidating, etc.
- State the purpose of the practice, letting the patient know you want to help them and others get the care they need.
- Suggest that the customer send in others they know who are having similar problems or who need other dental help.

Here is an example referral dialog:



“We enjoyed having you in the office. It’s great that you’re (taking care of yourself / getting this done / keeping yourself healthy). We want to help everyone get the care they need. If you know someone who needs our help, send them our way and we’ll take care of them.”

Hand the cards out as you use the dialogue. It helps if the card includes an offer for a free exam or service. This helps demonstrate the idea that you want to help.

Have the Conversation at the Right Time

The best time to provide a patient with a referral card is when they are expressing satisfaction with the practice or a service. They could be pleased with the location, appointment availability, that you take their insurance, your caring approach, the functional or aesthetic outcome of their treatment—whatever it is, they might be willing to share this positive experience with others.

To lead the conversation into referrals, you will use your referral dialog and encourage them to let others know about the care and help your practice has to offer. It takes time to build the habit to respond reflexively with your referral dialog as soon as you hear a patient express satisfaction, but it will become natural with time.

You can also use your referral cards as a reminder system for your staff. The cards can be attached to charts, routing slips, toothbrushes, literature, and other items to prompt each team member to initiate a conversation about referrals. If the cards are attached to the slip and the patient is seen by three team members, one might have a moment before the doctor enters the room to discuss referrals. If a team member does talk with the patient about referrals and gives them the card, ensure they know to leave the paperclip on the slip so the other team members are aware that they've already discussed referrals with the patient.

It's important that the doctors lead by example for referrals. If a patient is thanking the doctor and expressing satisfaction, the doctor should take the card off the slip, use the dialogue, and give the card to the patient. Two cards per slip should be adequate. If a patient asks for more cards, provide them!

Patients receiving a hygiene should be given a referral card during each appointment as they are usually seen once every 3-6+ months. Restorative patients should all get cards as well, but if they are running through a course of treatment that requires them to be in the office more frequently (for instance, once per week for four weeks), then choose one appointment to use the cards (perhaps when the patient is out of pain or seeing the culmination of a cosmetic process).

For at least the first month, someone who is trained on the referral program and process should be responsible for putting cards on patient slips. Once the procedure is fine-tuned, it can be passed over to a receptionist or other team member as desired.

Showing appreciation for patients who refer others is important. Send them a card to express your gratitude and note who they referred on their charts so you can personally and verbally thank them for the referral when they are next in the office. Consider a gift card, movie tickets, or account credits as a token of appreciation for the referral.

Staff Referrals

Staff referrals can be another overlooked source to bring in a large number of new patients.

Be sure to regularly inform your staff of meaningful patient successes so they understand the value of the dental treatments you offer to help them become advocates for dental treatment at your facility. This will also help them give better referrals with more specific information.

Have a staff meeting to talk with your team about referring their friends, family, and other people they know and meet to the practice. Mention that you'll offer their friends and family members a service discount or a new patient discount for anyone else.

You can also motivate your team to give referrals by providing incentives like a small bonus or gift for each patient they personally bring into the office. You can also create games and competitions to reach a certain number of staff referrals (make the target number of referrals low to start) and offer rewards like time off or a fun team outing.

External Marketing

Branding

Use a logo, slogan, photos, and other identifiers to project a consistent image of your doctor and practice.

Signage

Make your presence known by using signs that are large, simple, clear, well lit, easy to read, attractive, and visible from many angles. For a stand-alone building you may use an eye-level or raised sign placed near the street and another identifier such as a banner near the door or print on the window. In a professional building, you may be able to team up with other tenants to display signage outside and/or in the lobby.

As your marketing budget grows, consider additional signage such as billboards near the practice or in neighboring areas from which you attract patients.

Cards

Print business cards, appointment cards, and referral cards. Ensure they are designed in such a way that the staff can use them to encourage action from patients.

Uniforms

Use uniforms (even simple uniforms such as matching shirts or scrubs with similar colored pants) to project a more professional image.

Neighborhood Outreach

Buy a list of residents or residences within a 10 mile radius of your practice. Start with letters, flyers, postcards, door hangers, and/or other items and send them in sequence to introduce

your practice to those closest to you. You can continue to expand your reach out to further areas as you saturate the closest ones or increase your marketing budget.

In many communities, you can subscribe to a “welcome wagon” service where information is provided about new residents and resources are pooled to make free or discounted offers from a number of nearby businesses as a welcoming gesture toward new neighbors.

It is important to reach out at least three times before you can expect to get attention from the recipient, and continued contact is required to direct that attention and get the person to act.

In your outreach, offer a new patient discount to build interest.

Print Ads

Carefully research popular bulletins, newsletters, journals, magazines, periodicals, and other publications that are specifically circulated and widely read in your neighborhood and surrounding areas. You can usually place inexpensive advertisements and small discount offers and get good results.

Ensure you commit to run the ad run for a sufficient duration of time, as it often takes time and repetition to get results from this medium.

Website

It is very important to have a website and is less important to have a perfect one, so don't delay launching your website, as you can continue to make improvements to your site over time.

At a minimum, you'll want to include your logo, slogan, pictures of the office, doctor and staff, and your contact information (e.g., your address, e-mail address, phone number, hours, etc.).

You might also want to include some patient testimonials or before and after photos, and you can add links to other helpful sites, videos, and other educational materials about dental conditions and solutions. The websites that patients often find most useful are those that prominently display the doctor and practice name in the upper left corner of the home page and the office hours and phone number in the upper right corner.

Search Engine Optimization

There is an entire industry dedicated to the practice of enhancing your overall web presence and helping patients quickly find positive information about your office above your competition. You can hire a company or individual to troubleshoot and maintain this activity for you or designate a trained team member to work on it every day. Consistency is the key to making regular progress in this area, and there are a number of activities to tend to, such as the use of social media, online reviews, and ad placement.

Directory Listings

Previously, a practice would place an ad and listing in the Yellow Pages and leave it at that. Today, that concept has developed into multiple vendors for placing listings, multiple types of listings, and a gradient scale of prominent ad placement based on relevance and sponsorship.

Professionals that handle directory listings for you can be expensive and sales representatives may claim a certain listing will pay for itself and that the company will provide metrics that prove its value over time. Rather than accept this information at face value, consider using a

trail period. If you can't get one, opt for a shorter contract or back out clause if certain agreed upon goals aren't met.

The biggest mistake with this format is not paying attention to the analytics that are available from the practice's internal tracking methods as well as the service provider's metrics. If those are reviewed monthly, it will become evident whether the chosen listing is adequate and successful or not. Consistently track results and make appropriate adjustments.

Online Reviews

Many new patients will look for a dental practice online and will use reviews written by current and former patients to gain confidence about the practice. In order to enhance this process and present your practice in a favorable light, ask satisfied patients to write reviews about you and their experience in your office.

To make it easy, determine which review avenues are most used (Google, Yelp, Healthgrades, Facebook, etc.) and put together instructions you can provide to patients in person or in emails, newsletters, and other correspondence.

Occasionally, someone will write a review that is less than positive. It is vital to have a team member periodically look over all reviews and for the doctor/owner or office manager to respond kindly and truthfully to reviews as needed. This will ensure that negative reviews are disputed or removed or that potential patients will at least see another side to the story and the office's caring approach toward resolution.

Social Media

The use of social media is evolving as a means of marketing a practice and managing patient relationships. It's an activity that many practices consider and attempt but often don't dedicate the time and consistent attention to in order to get the best results. It is no longer a matter of just working to gain a high volume of subscribers or followers—It's more important to seek true engagement from those who are most likely to need and want your services.

One person should be in charge of social media for your office and should be given the time and training needed to oversee the activity successfully. Use survey results, conduct an ongoing analysis of what works best, and continue to adjust the theme and frequency of postings.

Here are some social media best practices:

- Consider the point of view of potential and existing patients when developing content. It should not be overly technical and should include news, tips, updates, fun facts, light education, and offers.
- Use visuals such as photos and graphics.

- Profile the doctor, team members, patients, successful cases and supporters.
- Include community events and projects of your initiation or those you support.
- Solicit positive feedback from members, subscribers, and followers to enhance your profile.

Affiliate Maintenance

Similar to insurance, if you participate in partner groups, discount plans, or affiliate with other businesses, clubs, or programs, ensure your information appears in the listings and as part of other outreach efforts so participants know about the benefits of your participation and can easily find you.

Public Outreach

Consider ads on TV or radio or in magazines, regional publication, neighborhood newsletters, etc.

Patient Appreciation

You can hold an annual patient appreciation event for health awareness, charitable work, cooperative community projects, and more. You can also decide to have your event coincide with the start of a marketing campaign that can be launched at the event to gain exposure and momentum.

Broad Exposure

Participate in “best of” campaigns that allow patients and others to vote for your office to be considered as one of the top practices in the area. Feedback is usually gathered by a magazine and results are published within the community. You can also ask local newspapers or regional online media to do an article about the doctor, something new or special about your office, or your participation in or sponsorship of local events.

Youth Outreach

You can connect with an elementary school near your office to offer tours and education. During their visit, hand out small bags with a toothbrush, toothpaste, and other sample items. You can also include an offer for a free exam or fluoride treatment for the child or a discount for the child’s whole family.

You can also visit classrooms to conduct presentations and provide moldable mouth guards for sports teams (e.g., football, soccer, hockey, and basketball) and deliver them in bags with

samples and discount offers to youth sports leagues, or offer to attend registration events and hand them out yourself.

Public Education

The doctor can write a column for a local newspaper or community publication to make interesting, non-technical information available that the public along with health and nutrition tips and an offer to answer dental questions or provide a free exam in your office.

This is also a great place to show before and after photos or use patient testimonials to address dental issues in a way the general public can relate to.

Intake

Many people only think of patient intake as it relates to a new or existing patient arriving at the front desk and being asked to complete forms at the time of an appointment. However, it's important to understand that intake actually begins at the time of the first call from a non-patient inquiring about your office and services.

Have one or two team members who are trained to receive and handle these calls available at all times. Do not let the call go to voicemail or go unanswered during business hours, and answer a ringing phone quickly. If you have to put someone on hold, ask permission, and make the wait as short as possible.

These trained team members “smile on the phone” and show caring interest throughout the conversation. Spend some time prepping team members for these calls by noting common questions and concerns posed in such calls and develop answers for each. Answers should be directed toward getting the patient to come into the office. Don't neglect to provide answers or let the conversation turn toward dodging and insincerity, but make every effort to let the patient know there are many things you won't be able to provide full information about until you have a chance to see the person and understand the situation fully. To keep things on track, offer a free exam so the patient feels comfortable coming in to meet the doctor, ask questions, and receive information with no cost or obligation.

Call to Action

Develop an offer you can make to a potential patient to get them to continue with the next step. This can be a free exam to get an initial appointment made or a discount on a first service if it is started within a certain amount of time. You can use this offer on phone calls, in person, or on your print ads, referral cards, website, and signage to help a patient keep moving forward toward optimal health.

Specialty Services

Perhaps you offer specialty services in your practice, such as endodontics, orthodontics, periodontics, prosthodontics, pathology, surgery, implants, sleep apnea, etc. If so, develop the materials and connections with related specialists and other practitioners to manage the activity and keep it working within the practice.

Newsletters

Send a newsletter quarterly or bi-annually to existing patients or those you saw once but don't necessarily anticipate immediately seeing again (perhaps an emergency patient that didn't schedule for a cleaning or other treatment). Keep it short and share community news, interesting dentistry facts, and promote health maintenance, the importance of completing needed treatment, and the idea of referring others to your practice.

Conclusion

Marketing consists of a wide range of activities that will take time to learn and adjust based on the needs of your practice. However, if you dedicate time to learn and implement an effective marketing strategy, your practice will see an increase in patients and you'll experience the positive effects of successful marketing.