

Whitepaper

MARKETING BEST PRACTICES

A GUIDE FOR MODERN
DENTAL PRACTICES

MARKETING BEST PRACTICES FOR MODERN DENTISTS

Dental marketing has changed dramatically over the last five years and dentists can often feel caught between two worlds: the old, tried-and-true marketing methods they've used for years and the future-focused digital methods patients are using today. As is often the case, the best approach actually lies somewhere in the middle. Marketing your practice in today's world requires a mix of new and old strategies and determining the right marketing mix requires careful evaluation. First, you need to re-examine conventional approaches to make sure they continue to perform -- preserving those that are still yielding results, and eliminating those that are ineffective or outdated. Second, educate yourself and your team on the merits of new marketing technologies, and gradually introduce them into the strategy.

This whitepaper will assess the pros and cons of established dental marketing methods and outline the benefits of new digital marketing strategies to help you refine your practice's marketing plan.

WEBSITES

Dental websites may seem like a passive form of marketing, but they are actually vital to your practice. More than ever, potential patients rely on a website to find out basic information about your dental practice including hours, location, services and even promotions. In fact, 30% of patients say their choice of dentist is greatly influenced by the quality of a practice's website.¹ Your website is also a valuable tool for your existing patient base. They can get information about you and recommend you more easily to their friends.

Websites used to be costly to build and hard to update but that has changed. There are a plethora of companies that build websites – many, specifically for dental practices. If you currently have a website and haven't updated it in a few years – it's time. Antiquated design, old programming technology and missing functionality like online appointment requests make your practice look outdated. If you don't have a website at all - you are missing out on a must-have opportunity to bring in new patients.

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Did you know that 60% of internet searches are conducted on smart phones?² That means, if you are going to have a website, you must also have a fully dedicated mobile site. A dedicated mobile site completely reformats when viewed on a mobile device – it's not a shrunken down version of what appears on the computer. It needs to have your phone number, directions and an option to request an appointment.

For additional information about updating and maintaining your dental website, read our in-depth whitepaper, “13 Warning Signs Your Dental Website Needs Help.” You'll have the opportunity to request this and other resources from us at the end of this whitepaper.

YELLOW PAGES

Yellow Page print ads are an old standby in dentistry, with a recent poll revealing that 61% of dentists still use this medium to advertise.³ However, these books have become gradually less and less cost effective over time. There is a massive consumer migration away from the Yellow Pages to Internet search, especially with the advent of smart phones. This means Yellow Pages are a dying medium – compounded by the fact that there are simply too many books and no way to determine which ones people are throwing away and which ones they're keeping, if any. The biggest negative with Yellow Pages is that advertisers are committed for a year whether the ad yields results or not. And once the ad is printed, it lives on for as long as people keep that particular book, meaning contact information can become inaccurate if the practice moves or changes phone numbers.

Yellow Page ads can also be difficult to track because if you advertise in multiple phonebooks, patients generally won't remember which one they found you in. That means unless you're being extremely sophisticated and using a different trackable phone number for each ad, you'll never know the results. If you currently have a good ad, and are able to measure positive results, stick with it. Otherwise, it may be time to move away from this medium.

If you do decide to continue with Yellow Pages some good rules of thumb are: Opt for color ads, stay around 1/4 page in size, and don't clutter up the ad with too much information. Also note that Yellow Pages companies are now often offering online listings as a combination with an ad in the printed book.

DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS (TEXTS & EMAILS)

Digital communications such as texting and emailing are relatively new in dental marketing however they offer surprisingly simple and effective ways to communicate with patients. More than 80% of cell phone owners use text messaging. And 31% prefer it to a phone call.⁴

It's possible to use texts and emails to confirm appointments, send birthday greetings and even do last-minute reminders of patients' appointments, so that they don't forget. Ideally you want a patient communication software, like PatientActivator, that does this automatically and updates directly into your practice management system. This frees up the front desk to talk with people who need a telephone or face to face conversation.

Whichever program you decide to use should have pre-designed marketing campaigns, birthday greetings and appointment reminders that you can customize and send with a few clicks.

Incorporating digital communications into your existing marketing plan is also cost-effective. The price comes solely from the cost of your patient communication software, which is usually a fixed monthly cost between \$200 and \$300.

If you used texting in the past, you may have received complaints from patients because they were being charged on a per-text basis. As the technology has developed, more and more people have universal data plans with unlimited texting included. It may be time to revisit texting.

“More than 80% of cell phone owners use text messaging – and 31% prefer it to a phone call.”

In order to do any of this, you'll need cell phone numbers and email addresses. This is something that the front desk needs to be diligent about - asking every time a patient comes in. No patient should leave the office without being asked for an email address and cell phone number. The right patient communication software can help you with this as well.

DIRECT MAIL

Direct mail advertising (postcards, self-mailers, etc.) has been the standard approach of many dental practices for decades, and it still can work if done well. Across all industries, one to three percent is considered a great response rate in this medium,⁵ but for a dental practice, response rates tend to be quite a bit lower. If it's well-designed, uses high-quality printing and has a good message in it, direct mail from a dental practice typically yields between 0.1 and 0.5 percent results. (That means for every 1,000 pieces that go out, you should get 1 to 5 new patients.) It's important to note that this response rate will vary based on factors that are unfortunately out of your control: how many other dentists are doing it, what other dental advertising is going on, the receptivity of your demographic to "junk mail" and the quantity of direct mail that each resident already receives.

The other problem is that direct mail is going to burn itself out in somewhere between six months and a year. Then you'll have to let your market "cool off" for another six months. This is why it's critical to track your results closely -- you want to know when to stop. This also makes direct mail less sustainable. You can't count on it month in and month out indefinitely, which means you'll need something else to drive new patients in during the dry months.

RADIO AND TV COMMERCIALS

Broadcast advertising can be very effective if you're in a town that's small enough. If you are in a city that's too large, the return will diminish because new patients won't go any great distance to your practice. The solution may be local cable, but very often they can't tell you how many people will be watching the shows you will be on. (Whereas the major TV networks have Nielsen ratings that tell them the size of the audience, cable stations estimate viewership based on subscribers -- which is the equivalent of making up the number).

If you decide to advertise your practice on television, there are a few things to remember. First, view it as a test, and only pursue this medium if you have the budget to experiment. Second, to tell if it's working you'll need to try it for at least three months, with frequent airings. Finally, get someone to produce a good-looking commercial. Cheap really fails on TV. With HD video cameras, the cost of producing a TV commercial has come down considerably, but this is not a job for amateurs in film school. You will probably have to pay \$20,000 or more for a good TV spot.

Radio is much more inexpensive to produce, usually around \$2,000 per spot. And media buying professionals will tell you that despite growing trends in TV, cable and internet advertising, radio advertising can still perform, particularly in cities where a large portion of commuters are still driving to work.⁶ The difficulty with radio is that promoting dentistry is what is called "a visual sell," which means emotional persuasion is done by showing the positive results. As a result, in radio, you have to work harder to paint a vivid picture. Another option is to promote a special service, like implants or no-prep veneers. Tell the listener what is new and why your practice is different.

NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Print advertising is usually ineffective for dentists and tends to be disproportionately expensive. Newspaper circulation and readership have steadily declined over the last 10 years.⁷ And the total subscriber number is misleading because it tells you nothing about who actually sees your ad.

Magazines can cost from \$1,200 to \$5,000 per month or per issue, depending on ad size and demographics for a 12-week campaign.⁸ Some cosmetic dentists may be able to justify the cost of these ad pages in local high-end consumer magazines, but most dentists may end up losing. Being in them also can make you seem expensive, so your target audience is narrowed, and you may miss the best source of new patients: the avoiders and procrastinators.

Neighborhood newspapers are the best option and are worth testing if you really want to explore print advertising. These smaller papers tend to be read by more people, and they target locally, which means you're reaching the people close to your practice.

NEWSLETTERS

A newsletter is one of the most effective tools to grow and maintain your dental practice, which explains why a national survey in 2011 revealed that 53% of small business owners use newsletters to communicate with their current clients.⁹ After all, if you're not communicating what you do to your patients on a regular basis, then why would you bother advertising to new patients?

Newsletters offer multiple advantages. First, they can usually be produced cost-effectively, particularly if you send them via email. Good patient communication software, like PatientActivator, will include templates and content to make it easy to build and send a newsletter. Second, newsletters keep you top of mind for existing patients, helping lower your recall time and prevent patients from going dormant – and ultimately guaranteeing you more production. And lastly, digital newsletters with interesting, relevant content can be easily forwarded to friends and family, potentially bringing in more patients from word of mouth. Newsletters are a baseline marketing tactic that every practice should be using -- either by email, by mail, or both.

FACEBOOK (SOCIAL MEDIA)

Social media is the new word of mouth and it requires a specific strategy for a dental practice. The more places a dental practice is listed on the Internet with accurate, relevant, interesting content, the more likely that practice is come up in a natural (free) search on Google+, Yelpo, et al. In other words, building a social media presence is worth the effort. Facebook is the biggest and most important social media site, so that's the first step in building a social media presence. Nothing else comes close in terms of time spent and number of real users.

“28% of 18-34 year-olds check Facebook before they get out of bed!”

Facebook used to be just another social media site, but it has evolved considerably, becoming a true marketing platform. 28% of 18-34 year-olds check Facebook before they get out of bed!¹⁰ Facebook has become a way people learn about businesses, services and products from their friends, and their friends' friends. Best of all, having a Facebook business page is free – which means there's no reason you shouldn't already have one.

In 2013, Facebook created Graph Search – which essentially allows users to search for any type of content on Facebook. With Graph Search users can now type “dentists my friends go to” and the results will instantly appear. They can open the dentists’ fan pages and read what everyone has posted. They can even search the content of the posts and get results. Graph Search has radically changed the value of Facebook from a marketing standpoint.

You can also buy advertising on Facebook. Similar to paid search, you pay when someone clicks on your ad. You can target specific demographics and interests, then Facebook overlays it’s own process involving user conversations and preferences to feed users ads most relevant to them. This is a relatively new medium, but might be worth exploring and getting ahead of the crowd. Finally, Search engines look at the content on Facebook fan pages – which adds to your SEO.

For instructions on how to set up a Facebook business page and ideas on what to post on Facebook, please see our whitepaper, “Facebook 101.”

PUBLIC RELATIONS

In general, dentists should tread lightly when engaging in on-camera Public Relations efforts, particularly if you’re not telegenic (as most people are not) or get nervous on camera (as most people do). That doesn’t make good television. If you’re the exception, great. But for most dentists, other advertising approaches will likely be a better use of time and resources.

One Public Relations tactic that can be more successful is writing a regular article in a local newspaper. This is worth pursuing if another local dentist isn’t already doing it. Become a source to the neighborhood reporter working the health beat. Offer him a tour of your office and go out to lunch to discuss the importance of oral health in relation to a person’s overall health. The next time he’s writing an article, he may think of you as a resource and call you for a quote, or even a bylined article. Over time, you may build a name for yourself in this way. But keep in mind that there are roughly 156,000 dental practitioners in the United States¹¹ and in any given area, only one or two dentists can share the spotlight.

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KEYWORD SEARCH/PAID SEARCH

Keyword search is also called “paid search” and is exactly what it sounds like. You are paying to get an ad for your practice to come up on the first page of search engine results. Each time someone clicks on your ad, which transfers someone to your website, you are charged. However, this is still a long way from the person becoming a patient.

You can set a monthly budget for how many clicks you buy and set a maximum bid you’re willing to pay for each keyword. If people bid more than you though, your ad won’t appear. Google offers a keyword tool that shows you what the current bid range is for each keyword, so you can best decide how to allocate your monthly budget. You’ll also get a detailed report on what you paid per click, on average, how many clicks there were, and what your average position was on the page.

Bidding is becoming more competitive each year with some of the most desirable keywords going for \$25 a click. Realistically you want to be paying \$1 to \$3 per click and you should expect that it will take between 50-150 real clicks to get a patient in the door.

Finally, coming up in the #1 paid search position is overrated. Coming up in the second or third position is fine. Not only will you often pay too much to be first, there's an interesting phenomenon whereby Internet users will frequently click on the first paid ad, then go back and click on the second and third. Your goal is to show up on the first page.

You can do a traditional keyword search or, with Google Places, you can pay to have your practice ad come up when the local map comes up. This is a valuable feature, now, but once more dentists in your area have a Google Places account, you won't stand out unless you pay to be featured.

Internet marketing is the ultimate moving target—systems will change, new services will emerge and it will get more and more complicated. But it's a game worth entering.

For additional information on search engine optimization, please see our whitepaper, "SEO Decoded."

ONLINE COUPON/GROUPON

For the most part, these services are being restricted by dental societies, because it looks a lot like fee splitting (and often is exactly that.) Aside from regulatory restrictions, these services present a host of other problems such as:

- Staffing to handle the phone calls. Most calls will come in the day of the deal and your front desk may be overwhelmed.
- Many of the patients who show up are one time users. They are there for the deal, but do not plan on returning.
- Your own patients may see the deal and ask for the same price.
- You cannot do these offers very often as the demand is higher than the supply. More dentists want to do these than Groupon or other services are willing to accommodate in any given month.

If you decide to try one of these services, attempt to address the above issues prior to running your ad.

VALPAK®, ETC.

Advertising in this medium does not do much for a dental practice. You show up in a stack of 100 other advertisers, and the only people who open them are those looking for a big discount. Experiment if you must, but do it with a critical eye, and look very closely at not only the total patients, but the total production from the mailers as well.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE MARKETING

Speaking another language in your office is highly advisable now more than ever, with the country's diversity growing rapidly. The 2010 government census reports that over the last ten years, the Hispanic and Asian population have grown considerably.¹²

To tap into these markets, you may want to test using the local newspaper of a particular community, or advertising in the ethnic supermarkets. They also have language-specific Yellow Pages, and this is one instance where this approach may be more effective. It's also worthwhile to promote the languages spoken in your practice on all your materials (website, mailers, etc.) as this helps set your practice apart.

DENTAL SEMINARS FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES

If you are starting a practice in a new area, one of the least-expensive promotions you can do is to offer a dental seminar to local businesses in the area. Most businesses over 100 employees regularly do seminars for their staff, usually to explain benefits such as the 401(k) plan or their health coverage, or for sexual harassment awareness, etc. However, almost none of them take an in-depth approach to their employees' dental health. This is a great opportunity.

Contact the Human Resources department of the company and explain to them the high cost of untreated dentistry, reflected in absenteeism and lower productivity. Say that you are willing to do one-hour presentations and explain the value of taking care of their teeth, and also explain in detail how their dental benefits work, if they offer a plan. You may get a big case each time you do this. Do it for as many businesses as you can. Then get back there on a regular basis and a lot of work may come your way thereafter.

PATIENT REVIEWS

The biggest trend in online search behavior is consumer reviews. While patient reviews may not seem like marketing – they most certainly are. People love online reviews and they expect them for everything. If a consumer can't find a review for a business or product – they will move on to the next one that does have reviews. Over 70% of consumers are influenced by customer reviews when choosing a dentist.¹³ Because reviews play such a large part in how consumers choose a dentist – whether or not you have reviews will affect your website, your social media strategy and even your practice politics.

It may seem awkward to ask a patient to give you a review immediately after treatment, but you need an active process for generating a steady stream of positive reviews. The best way to do this is by emailing your patients and asking them to do it for you. If you use a digital communication application like PatientActivator, then you can do an email campaign specifically asking patients to go to your Yelp or Google page and post a review.

“Over 70% of consumers are influenced by customer reviews when choosing a dentist.”

You don't need new reviews every day. A couple a week is great. The important element is for them to be recent. The older they are, the more reluctant people are to give them credibility. Also know that you are bound to get some bad reviews. It happens. However, know that bad reviews also give the practice credibility. If you didn't have any bad reviews, all your reviews might come across as fake.

One downside to reviews is that you have no ability to remove a review posted on a third-party website such as Yelp or Google. Reviews are considered free speech – protected by the First Amendment. It's important to stay on top of your reviews. Products like ReputationMonitor can help.

To learn more about requesting and managing patient reviews, please request our whitepaper, “Dealing with Patient Reviews.”

NEW PATIENT LEADS

Many companies will sell their product based on a claim that they deliver "new patients" to your practice, when in fact they offer any number of marketing services – from websites to video production. A true lead referral service, like 1-800-DENTIST, will directly engage in a wide variety of marketing and advertising activities in order to deliver a consistent flow of pre-qualified local new patient leads to your practice whose needs have been matched against your practice profile. Ideally, it should also be a company that specializes in dentistry and only markets to dental patients. Given these factors, a lead referral service will be a consistent source of new patient leads and help steadily increase your patient base – more consistently and with more trackability than most other marketing approaches

Another benefit of this approach is that in order to generate leads, referral services are already doing a large amount of advertising for you. In other words, the company invests a much higher amount to attract consumers than a single dental practice could (or should) ever spend on its own. This can be a huge win for dental practices with limited marketing resources, because you reap the benefits of big budget advertising without the expense – and the only thing you pay for are the actual leads generated for your practice.

A final consideration is that in order for referral services to be most effective, your front office must be well-trained to receive media-generated leads. The success of any advertising will depend upon the efficacy of your front desk, so consider investing in phone skills training. Remember, the person answering the first phone call is the single most important factor in turning a new patient lead into an actual patient of record. Top referral services will often include phone skills training as part of the membership.

SUMMARY

Clearly, each advertising approach has its own benefits and drawbacks – and no one approach will work exactly the same for every practice. A healthy mix of traditional and new media, combined with high patient loyalty and word of mouth is usually the best strategy for a healthy growing practice. Whatever you decide to do, track your results assiduously so you can do more of what works, and eliminate the tactics that under perform. The most sophisticated way to track your marketing would be to create a unique phone number and URL for every advertising channel, and run a report to measure how many calls or clicks each receives. However, in a dental practice this can also be achieved more simply by training the front desk to ask every new patient how they heard about the practice, then recording the source of that patient in the practice management software. The important factor is to be able to see clear numerical proof of which channels are bringing in new patients and production, and continuing to adjust your strategy to yield the best return on your marketing investment.

ABOUT FUTURE DONTICS®

FutureDontics®, parent company of **1-800-DENTIST®** and **Patient Activator®**, is the nation's leading provider of dental marketing services. Since 1986, the Los Angeles-based company has dedicated itself to developing powerful products that help dental practices thrive.

Recognized as dentistry's premier new patient leads program, the company's flagship 1-800-DENTIST service has helped over 9 million dental patients nationwide connect with member dentists. Every day, thousands of patients get personally matched to dentists through their 24/7 call center or via 1800dentist.com.

PatientActivator — FutureDontics' communications, social and online reputation solution — increases production and boosts the practice's online presence with automated appointment confirmations and tools for marketing, social media, reviews and much more.

FutureDontics also offer an extensive library of dental marketing resources – including whitepapers, webinars and videos. With unlimited live customer support, dentistry's best marketing products and North America's largest dental referral website, FutureDontics is the proven way for dental practices to grow their patient base and increase production year after year.

For more information about our dental marketing services visit us at **www.futuredontics.com**

To get a FREE copy of any our additional resources, including whitepapers, videos, webinars and more, visit futuredontics.com/MoreResources.

For info about our suite of dental marketing products, call 1-855-230-1313.

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