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steps for marketing your practice successfully during a recession

Marketing should be viewed as the lifeblood of a dental practice, says **Dr John White***.

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Marketing is often seen by smaller businesses as a luxury, the Friday afternoon job that attention is given to when the week's more pressing duties have been addressed. However, it should more accurately be viewed as the lifeblood of a practice, as without a ready supply of new patients and a capacity to retain existing ones, there is no business. Marketing the surgery becomes even more important in a recession, during which, like it or not, patients view a visit to the dentist as non-essential, and when money is tight they may simply leave it if they are not experiencing pain. Marketing need not be rocket science, but it does require a resource commitment be it in time or money if it is to produce dividends.

An intangible service

Dentistry is of course a service, and as such has a number of unique characteristics that effectively make it harder to market than soft drinks and chocolate bars. Key amongst these unique characteristics is that it is intangible, there is nothing physical to show as a result of consuming the

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service, and consequently patients need to use other things to assess the quality of the treatment that they receive. The receptionist's manner, the dentist's attitude and the nurse's empathy will all be used as barometers of quality in the patient's mind.

Physical evidence can be used though to make a visit seem more tangible, and to influence quality perceptions in the absence of other indicators. Patients are unable to compare different dental practitioners' drilling and filling skills in the same way as they might tins of baked beans in the supermarket, so they assess the things they can measure, for example: the surgery's kerb appeal; interior décor; staff uniforms; age/state of equipment; age of magazines in the waiting room; availability of coffee, etc.

Steps to success

1 Put your patients first. Successful organisations put their customers' needs and wants first. Staffing and processes should be managed for the patients' benefit, not the surgery's benefit. For example: a patients' rather than a staff car park; opening hours; staff lunch breaks, etc.

2 Recruit, train and retain the best staff you can. People in dentistry really are the biggest asset, and you often get what you pay for. Underpaid, under-skilled and unmotivated support staff will hamstring excellence delivered elsewhere in the business. Ensure all staff are trained so as to achieve a consistent quality of treatment and service irrespective of the receptionist, nurse or dentist seen.

3 Price services according to your market. With high prices come high expectations. If expectations are not met, complaints will be high, or worse still patients will vote with their feet.

4 People talk! Whether happy with or disappointed with a service people tell others. Unfortunately, when they are happy with it they tell fewer people than when they are disappointed. Negative word of mouth can therefore quickly destroy a successful business. Positive word of mouth is, however, the best practice builder you can get – free promotion delivered by committed patients.

5 Act quickly and decisively. If there is a problem in the surgery, deal with it quickly and unambiguously. Do not wait for patients to complain if you know a problem exists – sort it out.

6 Heed complaints and praise in equal measure. People complain; whatever you do you will never completely eliminate them, but listen to the ones that you receive. If one patient is complaining, like as not there are a number of others who have suffered in silence, or taken their business elsewhere. It is easy to focus on the negative, so don't dismiss praise when you receive it. Reviewing patient feedback enables the surgery to develop a strategy that minimises complaints, and maximises happy patients, and consequently positive word of mouth.

7 Use promotion with care. Whether you run an NHS, private or mixed practice, promotion should be used with caution. Over-promoting the business is wasted money. Advertising and other promotional activities should therefore reflect daybooks, and should be managed to keep a steady supply of patients returning or registering for treatment. Avoid vanity-based promotions eg an advert in your favourite magazine. Monitor the effectiveness of your promotional activities, and use these data to influence what you do in the future.

8 Location, location, location. If establishing a new surgery, think carefully about where you locate it. The greater the population density and passing traffic in the area, the greater the level of awareness, patient registrations and revisits you will achieve. Also consider the availability of parking and other local amenities (eg shops and pharmacist).

9 Maintain investment. Whether in good times or bad (as is the case now with a recession) you should maintain investment in the practice and marketing to support it. Research shows that those businesses that invest in a recession are best positioned to capitalise on growth opportunities once it ends.

10 Develop a practice brand. Like it or not whether a single person surgery or a multi-associate business, your practice is a brand. When people pass on your details to friends or family, or choose to revisit, they are 'buying into' your brand. You can develop your practice brand, or you can let others eg patients, competitors, media, etc do it for you. Clearly if you let others shape your brand the values you are known for may be very different from those that you would wish to foster. Give thought to how you want your practice to be perceived (eg caring,

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reasonably priced, friendly), and ensure that comes through in the patient experience eg practice communications (eg adverts); local media coverage; exterior of the building; internal decoration; reception staff; nurses and dental surgeons.

Smart practices grow

You will note that whilst the title of this article makes reference to marketing in a recession, there has been only limited explicit discussion of it. The frank truth is that there is really very little difference between marketing in boom times and bad times. The key factors are that during a recession patients are more price-value conscious, and there is more direct and indirect competition for the pound in the patient's pocket than ever before. As implied above, a recession need not be seen as a bad thing. Smart practices can grow despite it and dumb businesses will go to the wall, meaning less competition for you once it is over.