

# Methods of corporate branding: what's happening?

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**In this article I would like to give my perception of the different approaches corporate bodies are adopting to the issue of branding dentistry. Specifically I wish to highlight the central issue concerning branding which is the importance of the implied message that any brand seeks to convey.**



Dentistry has always had branding. It is nothing new. The NHS itself is a brand — however ridiculed it is, it still means something to many people. There lies a problem branding can have — it can deliver one thing while the consumer expects it to deliver something else. I would argue that the NHS brand, although very powerful, is losing its credibility and thereby is being diminished in consumer terms. It is trying to be all things to all people when it can no longer afford to.

The other traditional brand in dentistry is the dentist him/herself. However, here too there are signs that this brand loyalty is being questioned. This shift in loyalty is driven by a number of factors:

- Uncertainty as to what service is being obtained.
- Lack of 'buy in' to what the dentist is offering.
- A desire to try something different.
- A greater need for convenience.

Developing a corporate dental brand starts with a number of key questions that need to be answered before one decides the nature of the brand. These are:

- What is your market or preferred target audience/purchaser?
- What are the messages which will attract them?
- How are these messages to be supported and maintained?

The response by the corporate has shown that there are many ways to promote oneself to the patient. There is not a right way or a wrong way unless the message becomes mixed or confused.

Boots The Chemist have a head start. There are strong consumer messages embedded in their name already — trust, reliability, professional, value for money. These messages extend very easily into the dental market. The job in this instance is half done as Boots only have to ensure that these attributes are delivered. Consumer

research to date suggests that they are achieving this.

Whitecross were the first corporate body to attempt to brand dentistry in the high street and their outlets were the first to bring a retail feel to dentistry. While traditional dentistry has been shy of coming forward, here was a group that in many respects broke with tradition and substantially shifted the consumer's concept of how dental services are delivered.

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James Hull and Associates have adopted a similar route and, if anything, have taken it slightly further. Extensive use of glass frontages, stainless steel and bright modern wood panelling has challenged the style of the traditional dental practice with strong messages suggesting something new, bold, welcoming and safe. They have gone one step further by personalising the brand, thereby suggesting that James D Hull personally guarantees all the dentistry which is undertaken at the premises. We therefore have a mixture of the personalised brand, which, after all has a long tradition in

dentistry, linked to a corporate brand.

Dencare is in the process of attempting to combine the best of the traditional with the best of the new. The messages that are being fixed to the brand are that the practices are local, caring, stable as well as clinically modern, quality led with an experienced quality assured service.

How Specsavers will approach the branding issue remains to be revealed. One possible strategy would be to centre their brand approach on the power of their existing name. They would be looking for brand extension from their core activity, rather in the manner that Virgin have done with great success in a range of vastly different retail and business activities. Therefore, while the name Specsavers has no 'attachment' within dentistry they plan to build the association with their core retail messages.

In summary, I have provided brief examples of five companies with very different approaches to the same market but not necessarily the same type of customer. The challenge for the two retailers, Boots and Specsavers, is for them to adapt their approach from selling products to selling services. The risk for the others is to build brand recognition — a very expensive process. So why are they doing this? As patients become consumers, the traditional method of referral, word of mouth, becomes challenged by familiarity. Simply put, the more you see and hear a name, hopefully the more you will associate and accept its messages.

All corporates are at the very early stages of the branding process. The existing companies are likely to adapt their styles and approaches as their marketing concepts mature and each company seeks to further differentiate its own messages from those of competitors.

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