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Touting your wares

Sheila Scott, business consultant to dentists and their teams, discusses the power and focus of dental practice promotions

How much are you spending on promotions?

A significant number of practices are spending a lot of money on marketing promotions at the moment – particularly to attract those interested in cosmetic treatments. A quick web search in your region for whitening, invisible braces, veneers and other cosmetic treatments including facial aesthetics, will throw up countless practices chasing the cosmetic holy grail – the new patient who needs a makeover. And there are offers galore: benefits and discounts on advertisements, articles, flyers, web offers, special days and open sessions.

Sustainable marketing expenditure

Now, the practices that are spending on marketing are undoubtedly building profile and attracting new patients. But I do wonder about the long-term benefit of this expenditure when it is totally concerned with cosmetic opportunities. What if a number of these new cosmetic patients accepted a course

of treatment and then disappear? If you're not also working hard to encourage them to become regular attendees, that do attend regularly, you could be finding yourself spending on marketing just to keep next month's figures afloat and no more.

Promotion can become a vicious cycle that makes existing patients a little uneasy as their practice's focus begins to change from traditional dental care to a more glitzy, glamorous emphasis. And from a practice's perspective, a reliance on high margin cosmetic work to stay afloat is a dangerous strategy, especially if the big-ticket opportunities begin to dry up as seems to be the case recently.

Building stability

In my opinion, it is far better to build your practice on a stable platform that focuses on what's really important to patients – for example, dental health. This keeps existing patients coming back regularly which inevitably results in reduced costs for you,

a wider audience to appeal to and the ability to rejuvenate existing patients' recommending behaviour thus creating a pool of additional patients.

Think for a moment about a formerly reluctant patient walking past your practice, or browsing your website. If your window or website is full of only cosmetic offers and makeover statements, how does that patient feel about walking in? Do they see a practice dedicated to 'looking after me' dentistry, that might give them a 'clean bill of health' (what they are hoping for!). Or will they fear being 'sold' these treatments that are advertised? Is your market positioning keeping some patients away?

A health focus

Why can't we design more promotions targeted at showing how the practice helps patients to achieve strong and healthy teeth and gums? Instead of smile makeovers, can we provide health assessments, risk reduction plans or dental fitness profiles? Shouldn't we be telling the public about the skills and habits they and their children need to adopt to avoid dental fillings for life? Can we please let the public know that the practice believes that dental health is more important than a makeover? And that if makeovers are requested, they will only be provided once dental health is secure?

It doesn't take a huge amount of in-practice organisation to put a dental health approach, promotion or campaign together. And a dental health campaign does far more for the apparent trustworthiness of the practice than another whitening offer out of this context. However, you must be careful to be delivering just what you promise. For most practices that means re-examining the language and explanations used in day-to-day patient contact, and a change in focus to the positive drive for dental health.

'It doesn't take a huge amount of in-practice organisation to put a dental health approach, promotion or campaign together.'

It means encouraging every single patient that attends, to return to the practice exactly as recommended – not two, three or ten months after the recall period stated or reminded. It means very positive communications about why these return visits are necessary.

It means encouraging the vast majority of patients to attend their hygiene visits as recommended – not when they feel they can find the time or when they can afford them. This means practices have to be exceptional at explaining why these visits are necessary and of benefit to each patient.

Encouraging referral

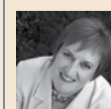
If you're already doing all of this, can you please now think about giving your patients some 'free' dental health advice to tell their friends about, or to pass onto other friends who might be interested? Can you please dedicate most of the space on your website to telling patients how you can help them to keep strong and healthy, and help keep problems at bay?

And if you must produce some promotions, can you think of ways to prove your attention to the most important things that patients want from practices...

1. To trust their dentist and
2. To receive care and treatments that improve the health of teeth and gums

Once you've set the scene as a totally health-focused practice worthy of the patients' trust, you should find that occasional promotions for cosmetic treatments, promoted as an adjunct to the health-based care you offer, attracts more new patients and interest from existing patients without causing that little bit of unease in those who already think you're wonderful. **DT**

About the author



Sheila Scott has dedicated the last 20 years to helping dentists and their teams grow and prosper. See her website www.sheila-scott.co.uk for more details, or contact her on 01543 862950.

