

10 Proven, Powerful & Simple Steps to Attract More Fee-For-Service Patients

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In this series, Dr. William Dorfman has outlined a variety of marketing approaches that can be used to attract more fee-for-service patients. In this article, he and William (Howie) Horrocks integrate those approaches with specific tips to form a plan of action, providing steps that can be implemented to make a practice's marketing strategy more effective.

Start With Internal Marketing

1. *Talk to your mailing list & it will talk back.* Your first, most cost-efficient action is to start with your own patients. Marketing to those who are familiar with you is easier and more profitable than marketing to strangers.

Internal marketing is about "upselling," that is, selling more dentistry to those who are already buying dentistry from you. The idea is to take those who are happy with your product and to sell them more of it or to sell it to them more often. They (and you) will benefit tremendously.

Bottom line: You must develop regular communications with your patient base. This could be a practice newsletter or even a personal letter that you send quarterly or, preferably, monthly. If your patient list is not yet computerized, make this a priority project. Most word-processing software allows you to write a single form letter to your patients and then to personalize it by "mail merging" your patients' names and addresses on the letter.

You don't need to hire a design firm to produce a four-color, eight-page magazine every month. A simple one or two-page newsletter from your office is fine, and you can upgrade the quality as you go. The important thing is to start sending something now.

What should you say? Educate your patients on teeth whitening, bonding, veneers, air abrasion, intraoral cameras, porcelain crowns, tooth-colored fillings, and other dental topics. Cover one topic per month, and give patients a reason - such as a limited-time offer relating to the month's topic - to call your office. You can't just say that veneers are great or that inlays are better than fillings; you need to tell your patients what veneers and inlays will do for them and give them a reason to call you now - not next year. ("A complimentary, no-obligation cosmetic exam will determine if veneers or inlays are for you. Call for your exam today.")

These letters or newsletters are not a substitute for your current recall efforts. (Hygiene recalls are a separate operation that employs postcards and phone calls.) They should provide information about the benefits of major dental treatments and services as well as invite patients to call and to refer friends and families to the practice.

2. *Seek referrals.* You can and should be asking for referrals from your existing patients and from your staff. Most patients are very willing to help and are not put off when you ask them; however, it's sometimes uncomfortable to ask. Why not give patients something to take with them that they can pass along to their friends or family members? Hand them dental health certificates and ask that they give them to others - "You're a great patient. Why don't you give this to one of your friends or someone else you care about? It will allow them to receive a dental exam at a special introductory offer price."

If the handout is too small or flimsy, the patient may just toss it, so give them something that looks like a check or a certificate; make it look important (because it is).

When a referred friend or family member arrives for an appointment (not just schedules one, but actually shows up), send the referring patient two tickets to a first-run movie or a gift certificate to a restaurant along with a personal note of thanks. Or send flowers, mugs, or something else the patient values. That way, the referring patients receive benefits, which means they are more likely to refer a second and third time. Make sure you send the "rewards" to their work addresses so more people find out how generous you are.

Bottom line: Everyone should leave your office with promotional, educational, or referral-inducing literature.

3. *Use photos - everywhere.* Before-and-after photos should line the walls of your reception area and operatories. When people who are waiting see the difference between a mouthful of silver-mercury amalgams and "white fillings," they'll be more receptive once they are in the chair. A before-and-after shot of a good veneer case with the caption, "Porcelain veneers - done in two visits," will impress most anyone. For teeth whitening, a nice set of comparison photos makes it much easier to sell this service. Have photo albums of your best cases along with testimonials from the patients, either. You can verbally describe veneers, inlays, and bonding, but your own description won't be as effective as a good before-and-after photo.

4. *Educate and motivate.* A nice addition to your photo gallery is a patient education video. Running a continuous-loop video in your reception area on the benefits of modern cosmetic dentistry not only distracts waiting patients, but shows them how good their smiles could look. Video or CD-ROM presentations in the operatory also raise dental IQ. You have a captive audience, so whenever you leave the room, simply turn on the presentation. This is the video age; people will watch anything on television screen, especially if they have nothing else to do and if it is right in front of them.

5. *Call them - don't be afraid.* Call everyone you anesthetized that day. This is a simple phone call made the evening after treatment. Ask them how they are doing, if the anesthesia has worn off, if they have any questions, how the bite feels, and so on. You want to know if anything is wrong so you can fix it right away - before they decide to go to another practice and disparage your work.

Some dentists think these calls will be seen as an intrusion, but patients truly appreciate the attention. You could say that the amount of admiration and attention you give to your patients determines the money you receive in return.

Add Some External Marketing

Your practice can hum along quite nicely for a long time on a referral-only basis; however, some external marketing should be done to make up for natural attrition. Focus attention on ways to reach the people who need, want, and can afford the dentistry you want to deliver.

6. *Use the Press.* Send regular press releases to all print and electronic media in your area to help focus public attention on dentistry in general and on your practice in particular. Send so many that you become very familiar to all the editors in your area. You can buy fax software that stores the numbers

of all the editors and media outlets in your area; once your release is written, you simply press a button to send it automatically wherever it needs to go.

The subjects you write about must be of interest to people, not simply advertisements for your practice, and what may be old news to you is new news for many. "Dentist Says Needle and Drill Nearly Obsolete" is a great headline if you want to talk about air abrasion. "Cosmetic Dentistry Demand Running High" is good if you want to talk about the increased interest in cosmetic dentistry.

Whenever the national press focuses on dentistry, take advantage of it on a local level with a press release. For example, the FDA recently approved the use of lasers for more than just curing composites. If you have a laser, this exposure affords you an opportunity to call attention to your practice. A nice headline might be "Sioux City Dentist Goes High-Tech with Newly Approved Laser".

If you don't have a laser, you can still take advantage of the press exposure by promoting what you do have and relating it to a laser. "Star Wars Era Comes to Dentistry" could be a headline. This release can talk about the laser but go on to mention advances such as new composites, air abrasion, intraoral cameras, multimedia presentations, or computer smile design.

Press release can create very positive effects for dentistry and for your practice. They're also an inexpensive way to increase your name recognition in the community.

7. *Develop an effective mailer.* Unless you're an experienced copywriter, it would be wise to have an ad agency help you with this step. A professionally prepared mailing piece can be used for years. And you don't have to have a high response rate for this to pay off; even less than one percent can be quite profitable. One good case will pay for the mailing - in some instances many times over.

To limit your risk and initial investment, first try an inexpensive postcard mailing. Don't be discouraged if it doesn't pull well immediately. Repetition is essential in advertising. You may have to try two or three different cards until you get one that brings in a decent response. If you ask an agency to design a mailing, they usually present you with three ideas. Ask them to produce the one you like best, but get them to agree to let you use the other two ideas as tests in case the first doesn't pull well. Test all three and settle on the one that yields the best response.

Target your mailings to areas near your practice that are affluent enough to afford full-care dentistry. You also can target people who have recently moved into your area. TRW has a service called Redi Comps (800-345-7334) that will tell you about all the new homeowners in your area as well as the values of their properties. This way you can weed out areas that are apartment-heavy or otherwise undesirable, ensuring that your mailings get to your target market. Other firms specialize in new movers specifically for the health professions. Try ProMail (800-258-0060) or your local mailing list broker found under "Mailing Services" in the Yellow Pages.

8. *Give and get help from people in related fields.* Establishing a cross-referral arrangement with a cosmetic surgeon, chiropractor, upscale hair salon, or talent agency will help you contact the type of patient you're seeking. With surgeons, call and ask if they would like to talk with you about having your patients referred to them. You can request to witness a surgery, and then invite the surgeon to your practice to see what a set of veneers will do for a patient's appearance.

With hair salons and talent agencies, offer to whiten the owners' teeth in exchange for displaying your photo album in their establishment and having your dental health certificates available.

Chiropractors often are very open to this kind of arrangement. Choose a practice that is doing well. You could send a mailing to your patients endorsing the chiropractor's practice while the chiropractor does a similar mailing to his or her patient about you. Be sure to include certificates for an exam in each mailing.

Establishing these types of relationships inevitably requires that you and your alliance partner become friends. You each need to have a genuine interest in helping the other.

9. *Get and give help from people in unrelated fields.* If your office is located amongst other businesses, it's a good idea to approach the people that work there and offer your services. An advantage you have is that you are near where they are employed; if you have extended hours they could come in before or after work. It's a great convenience for them. Point this out in a short letter or invitation, and have one of your staff hand-deliver it (including an offer for a reduced-fee exam or complimentary smile evaluation) to each of the businesses surrounding your practice.

10. *Stay current.* Being perceived as up-to-date is important if you want to attract patients who seek cosmetic and full-care dentistry. You won't be viewed as cutting edge, or even modern, with a 1950's dental chair and chipped linoleum in your operatory. You don't need to immediately buy every new gadget that comes along, but you should set aside funds throughout the year for major equipment purchases. In addition, you should provide the new treatments such as teeth whitening and halitosis treatment that are becoming increasingly popular.

The use of the latest treatments and equipment also can get you press attention, especially if you are the first in your area to acquire the new technology or to send out a press release. For example, air abrasion is attracting attention all over the country because people are very interested in the prospect of "no needles, no drills" dentistry.

Staying current also refers to continuing education. Dozens of great courses and seminars will help you sharpen both your clinical and management skills. Take advantage of them.

Of course, these ten items aren't the only things that you can do to attract the kind of patient you want. But they are effective, relatively inexpensive, and have proven themselves time and again. Use them well