

THE 9 AREAS OF EXPERTISE: MARKETING

By Roger P. Levin, DDS



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In consulting relationships with more than 24,000 dental practices since its founding in 1985, Levin Group has developed high levels of knowledge and skill in all areas of practice management and marketing, which we refer to as The 9 Areas of Expertise:

1. Production
2. Collections
3. Team Building
4. Scripting
5. Case Acceptance
6. New Patient Experience
7. Hygiene
8. Scheduling
9. Marketing



This whitepaper discusses marketing—the process by which practices attract new patients and strengthen relationships with existing patients.

Marketing has become critically important for dental practices since the Great Recession. With 75% of dentists reporting production declines in the past five years, according to the Levin Group Data Center™, many of them are searching for cost-effective ways to market their practices, generating more referrals, bringing in more new patients, increasing production and income, and achieving steady annual growth.

Dentistry and Marketing

Today, dental practices need to emulate the best businesses by implementing effective marketing programs. These include both internal and external marketing. In today's marketplace, patients—as consumers—welcome information about relevant services and opportunities. Educating patients through effective communication benefits the patient and the practice. Good marketing is actually good communication.

The marketing plan should align with this year's goals as well as the doctor's vision for the practice. If a practice is attempting to increase porcelain crown production, then a *two-crowns-for-the-price-of-one* type of campaign would not be appropriate. On the other hand, a strong marketing program that reflected the quality of crowns, the doctor's expertise and experience, the team's skills and compassionate care, etc... these would all attract the interests of potential patients and contribute to the practice's reputation and long-term profitability.

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Begin with a Marketing Plan... and a Marketing Coordinator (MC)

Haphazard marketing activities achieve haphazard results, at best. The first step toward becoming an effective marketer is to develop a realistic marketing plan that includes measurable performance targets and a marketing budget. The plan should include multiple strategies aimed at defined audiences. You will quickly see that a considerable amount of time and effort will be needed to implement your multi-strategy plan—at which point you will understand the value of having an MC to handle the logistics. If your practice is just beginning to ramp up marketing efforts, it would probably make sense for the MC to start out as a part-time employee. The number of hours worked could then be increased as needed.

Emphasize Internal Marketing

For dental practices, it helps to divide marketing activities into two broad categories: internal and external. Internal marketing involves communicating with existing patients. It's relatively inexpensive because you can communicate with them face-to-face at your office and through existing channels as part of the practice/patient relationship. External marketing costs more because you must reach out, mostly through paid advertising, to "strangers" who initially know nothing about you in most cases. Clearly, to achieve greater cost-effectiveness, your marketing plan should rely on internal marketing as much as possible. Here are several suggestions for generating the best results with your internal marketing plan:

1. Differentiate your practice with strong branding.

Your brand is what comes to people's minds when they think about your practice. It sets you apart from other practices in your area. It must originate in your thoughts and actions as practice leader, but your intention alone does not make it a reality. The perception by others is all that matters. Your team members must understand, help implement and communicate the brand, and patients—both current and prospective—must get the message and find it appealing.

What *you* believe to be a valuable differentiator for your practice may not be appropriate. As the doctor, your point of view may not translate into a marketable brand, so involve staff members (and even selected patients) in determining how to position your practice. Then, as you begin introducing your new branding, get feedback from patients to determine if you're projecting the message effectively... and if it seems to be accomplishing your marketing objectives.

2. Keep all patients informed about your services.

What's obvious to you will not necessarily be known by your patients. Descriptions and benefits of all the services you offer—especially those that are more specialized or new—must be communicated to patients. Avoid being selective about who you acquaint with which services. For example, a person who has never shown interest in cosmetic treatments may actually be a good prospect for them... or have a family member or friend who would be.

Whether mentioned by the doctor, hygienist or other staff member, services should become part of the conversation every time a patient comes in for an appointment. Attractive marketing materials in reception and treatment areas should also be used to promote interest. Other communications channels that exist between practice and patients, whether mail, email or social media, should also be used to spread the word about services offered.

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3. Train your team to ask for referrals.

New patients are the lifeblood of the practice, and referrals from existing patients are the best way to bring them in. Some referrals occur spontaneously, without prompting, but many other potential referrals never happen simply because doctors and their teams fail to ask for them.

By training staff members to ask for referrals, you can increase the number of new patients referred to your practice significantly. With scripting, team members can learn how to encourage patients to recommend the practice to people they know—not only family and friends but also fellow workers, neighbors and others they encounter in their lives. Your practice can also use simple signs, flyers and brochures aimed at generating referrals.

4. Sharpen your case presentation skills.

When a patient *needs* treatment, explaining it and getting their consent does not constitute marketing. However, when the subject is a cosmetic or elective procedure—including “upgrades” like implants rather than extractions or bridges—a certain amount of persuasion will probably be needed to gain acceptance. Many doctors fall short in this area. They tend to give more clinical details than are necessary (or understood by the patient) and not enough explanation of the benefits.

With scripts that help patients understand the advantages of treatment and include mention of financing options for more expensive services, you can raise your case acceptance rate to 90% or more. You should also follow up with patients who say “Maybe,” “I’ll think about it,” or “Not right now.” You’ll be surprised how many of these patients decide to move forward with treatment when you bring it up again six months or a year later.

5. Provide superior customer service.

Provide excellent customer service and you’ll be rewarded in a number of ways:

- *It will reinforce practice-patient relationships.* Few patients can judge your clinical skills, but most of them can tell the difference between good and great customer service. By making every effort to enhance patient convenience and comfort, welcoming them warmly to the practice, showing interest in them personally, and generally exceeding their service expectations, you and your team can build a strong and lasting relationship.
- *It will build the kind of value and trust that lead to higher case acceptance.* Your relationship-building efforts will earn patients’ trust. When the time comes for them to decide whether to accept treatment you are recommending, they will value your professional opinion, have confidence in your judgment and be far more likely to respond positively to your presentation.
- *It will give your patients something good to talk about.* Word-of-mouth advertising is the most powerful form of marketing. When your service goes above and beyond, patients will want to tell others about it, and they will make referrals enthusiastically... if you ask them to.

6. Stay in touch with patients.

Patient communication should extend beyond the office. Through email, social media, web updates, regular mail, etc., you can provide patients with oral health advice and news about the practice throughout the year. This will keep the relationship fresh even with patients you see only once or twice a year.

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7. **Reactivate inactive patients.**

Patients who have become inactive (those you haven't seen for 18 months or more) should not be considered lost to the practice. By contacting them and encouraging them to come in for professional care, you'll be able to return many of them to your active roster. Simply sending a letter and following up with a phone call will work in many cases. Even more effective is to apply the Rule of Threes... call once a week for three weeks, then send an email a week for three weeks and finally send a letter a week for three weeks. For maximum response, you might also want to offer a free comprehensive exam, explaining that you want to make sure their oral health has not declined while they were away from the practice.

Use External Marketing Selectively

External marketing can be useful, but few dentists or practice MCs are in a position to develop true expertise in this area, which is highly complex. If you decide that even a fully developed, consistent internal marketing program will not grow your practice quickly enough, you may want to reach out to the local consumer market to stimulate growth.

Unless you are in a position to make a considerable investment in advertising and promotion—and have identified a trustworthy, dental-knowledgeable marketing expert (or firm) to help you plan and execute your campaign—limit your external marketing activities to meeting narrow objectives. To be effective, ad campaigns must usually run for more than a few months, at considerable expense. And patients drawn in by a promotional “bargain” will most likely abandon your practice for the next deal that comes along. Here are some sound external strategies that can achieve results at reasonable cost:

1. **Upgrade your website.** Unless you've done so in the past year or two, it's time to hire professionals to improve the appearance, functionality and content of your practice website. An outdated online presence will turn off many potential new patients.
2. **Promote your practice to new community residents.** Acquire a mailing list of people who've moved into your area and send them a welcome kit... personal letter, practice brochure, and flyer offering a courtesy discount on hygiene or whitening.
3. **Use social media.** Online networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are great for getting the word out about your practice. Be sure to designate a staff member who can update and monitor your accounts regularly.
4. **Become the dental expert in your community.** There are opportunities in many communities for a dentist to provide oral health advice as a public service. You may be able to write articles or a column for a local paper. Offer to speak to school and civic groups. Participate in health fairs. And add to your visibility by sponsoring local teams and school events and supporting charities.

Conclusion

Expertise in marketing enables you to generate more patient referrals, acquire more new patients, increase production on a per-patient basis and build strong relationships with patients that will result in long-term stability and growth for your practice.

The *9 Areas of Expertise* cover every aspect of successful practice operation. By learning about these areas and seeking professional coaching and training to enhance all nine skillsets, practice leaders can grow their practices—and increase their personal satisfaction—in today's challenging economy.

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Dr. Roger P. Levin

Dr. Roger P. Levin is a third-generation general dentist and the Chairman and CEO of Levin Group, Inc., the largest dental practice consulting firm in North America. A keynote speaker for major dental conferences, Dr. Levin presents more than 100 seminars per year. He has authored 68 books and more than 4,000 articles. In 2014, he received the Dental Excellence Award for Best Practice Management Consultant from *DrBicuspid.com*. For the past 12 years, he has been named one of the "Leaders in Dental Consulting" by *Dentistry Today* magazine.



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