

SPREADING THE WORD

HOW DO YOU PROMOTE A DENTAL PRACTICE?

You might have a wealth of experience, friendly competent staff plus all the latest equipment. But without a continual flow of patients through the door, even the best dental practice is little more than an expensive waiting room.

Like any successful business, modern dental practices need to reach out, engage with their communities and build up local trade. Here we explain how you can market your business effectively, and how the skilful use of print advertising, direct mail and public relations as well as the internet will attract new customers and create loyal patients.

What can you offer?

The first stage in marketing a business is to be clear about what it stands for, the needs it serves and the advantages it offers to prospective customers. How would you describe the key focus of your practice? Do you want to attract families, or do you specialise more in bespoke cosmetic work?

These different 'audiences' will respond positively to different communication strategies and tactics. Therefore it is prudent to consider what matters to the type of people living in your local community and develop your marketing accordingly.

Glossy brochures printed on high-grade card will reflect well on high-value cosmetic offerings, whereas a potentially less affluent but much larger group such as 'mothers and children' will be attracted by materials showing a welcoming, child-friendly environment – big smiles and friendly faces. Older, retired patients want value and may be discouraged by impressive but expensive-looking brochures.



The '30-second sell'

Once you are clear about what the practice offers and the type of customer you need to attract, write a concise mission statement detailing your experience, treatments and specialist equipment etc. Make it simple, quick and easy to read. Using a friendly tone of voice and avoiding jargon will help to attract prospective patients and put them at ease.

People make healthcare decisions on an emotional level and your marketing needs to tap directly into these concerns and desires. Be clear in what you say and make sure it's relevant to your market; whether the message is one of financial 'offer' incentives, introductory deals, specialist services or family-focused.

See page two for a generic example (template) which could be adapted to suit your needs. It would work online as well as in the form of leaflets, mail shots and other marketing materials.



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Here is an example mission statement

Welcome to your new community dental practice in [insert location].

We are a family-focused practice, our friendly team offers convenient appointments for busy parents in a warm and child-friendly atmosphere.

Our sympathetic staff are dedicated to helping you relax, and our modern advanced treatment rooms are well appointed with state-of-the-art equipment – ensuring the very highest quality in oral care and attention.

You will be seen only by highly experienced dentists and technicians, providing comprehensive, expert care – at affordable family rates.

It is important to us that your whole family feels comfortable, looked after and listened to, and we would like you to enjoy your visit (as much as you can!).

Drop-in appointments are always available and we offer a free check-up for new patients until [insert date]!

Spreading the word about your dental practice

There are many routes by which you can raise the profile of your dental practice amongst prospective patients, in order to build custom rapidly and sustain growth. Advertising – ie literally running an advert in a newspaper or magazine – is only one key part of promotion.

The individual or combined deployment of advertising, direct marketing and public relations services can yield results but the options will depend on budget, expert resources, as well as media outlets and marketing channels available in your local area. Of course, if your budget can accommodate it, creating a friendly, easy-to-read website about your dental practice will help spread the word about your facility far and wide. Alternatively, you could register your practice with an online search directory.

Sending out direct mail: a flyer delivered via postal service can be one of the most effective means of introducing your practice to a target audience. You could also distribute these by leaflet dropping, or arranging for the flyers to be inserted into local publications. Using simple, direct messages and eye-catching offers, flyers build awareness of your business (promoting name, location, offers and services) and provide a relatively low-cost 'call to action' which can be repeated at timely intervals. By including a tear-off 'invitation' card, perhaps with details of a special offer, you can measure accurately the effectiveness of a direct mail shot as the cards are returned. It becomes apparent very quickly what works, and with experience you can become a polished copywriter.

DIRECT MAIL	ADVERTISING	PUBLIC RELATIONS
<p>Best at</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building awareness • Creating response • Generating trial • Selling 	<p>Best at</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building awareness • Creating noise vs. competitor activity • Selling 	<p>Best at</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building reputation • Changing perceptions • Influencing behaviour – can sell
<p>Your words...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct and tailored to your audience at timed intervals (not too often) • Viewed as commercial message 	<p>Your words...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When and where you want to say them, as often as your budget permits • Viewed as commercial message 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Others' opinions, often journalists • Viewed as independent endorsement or recommendation but coverage cannot be guaranteed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call to action (often incentivised) and simple messages delivered via direct mail pack (eg simple letter or complex mailing piece) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High impact visuals and simple messages delivered via an ad (eg broadcast, print, online) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex messages and opinions delivered via third-party interviews, editorial in the media and educational materials
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate cost (depending on item mailed and distribution quantity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate/high cost (depending on media routes chosen and frequency) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time intensive



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Handling the media

The accepted method of approaching the media is with a press release. The information in a good release is 'phased', such that the news facts and crux of the story are presented succinctly early on along with key supporting comments and credible third party views. This enables news writers to grasp the main points quickly and deliver coverage, which is useful both to your dental practice and the public.

Later on in the release is the time to bring in supplementary themes, ideas, additional background and extra comments if you wish to. This helps feature/interview/news analysis writers to 'craft' their coverage, building up a broader and deeper story of events, but without distracting them from the main point.

Avoid the temptation to bombard people with mail shots however, and (as with any printed marketing media) always triple check your contact details – email, website and phone number in particular. This might seem fundamental but there is no greater discouragement to a new business than the perception of disinterest, especially when people are making an effort to contact you.

Placing advertising: an eye-catching print ad campaign will create focused awareness of your practice's key features and benefits, fostering familiarity and prompting people to recognise (even seek out) your premises.

Ads range from small, self-composed 'classified' entries on a newspaper page through to full-colour single- or double-page spread display ads bespoke designed by a creative agency. These may be positioned in local/regional healthcare, lifestyle or other targeted consumer publications.

Identify the magazines, newspapers and websites serving dentistry in your local community and enquire about distribution, options and rates for display ads. Seek 'multi-issue' discounts (ie it may be cheaper per ad to run three rather than one), and emphasise the importance and central position of your business at the heart of local community.

For better value still, find out the title's publishing date and call up to a week before (when the sales team is closing) and they are more likely to sell remaining advertising space at a reduced cost.



Making the most of public relations:

Public relations (PR) is less about direct promotion and more focused on subtler, but arguably more powerful, factors such as business reputation, customer perceptions and positive word of mouth recommendation; all are strong influencers over people's behaviour.

The processes in PR allow you to communicate more complex messages about your business, delivered through a third party and seen as independent endorsement. These include editorial in the media (journalists writing articles), third-party interviews and educational materials.

Your PR must be newsworthy or issues-related to be viewed by any journalist as credible for publication. Only stories of 'value' to readers will gain column inches and editors are notoriously protective about this space; that is what they are paid for.

The launch or expansion of a dental practice – though noteworthy to you – is not newsworthy to an editor. You need to 'hang' this communication message on a worthy story that is interesting, engaging and relevant to the community.



Writing a press release

When writing your press release you may find it helpful to follow these seven simple rules:

1. grab attention
2. make it relevant
3. state who, when, what, where and how
4. photo opportunity
5. key messages
6. interviews and sound bites
7. contact details.

For example: is it the first new dental practice in the area for 20 years? Can you work with local authorities on a newspaper 'interview' piece discussing the issues of importance to the local community, showing the practice as a partner in improving local healthcare services and an ally to other regional enterprises? Do you have support from respected key opinion leaders in the sector (this could take the form of testimonials from satisfied patients etc)?

questions and contribute to discussions that you did not expect a journalist to ask or instigate.

Focus on delivering your key messages, but note that avoiding unexpected questions or attempting to divert attention away from a particular line of questioning will at best damage your credibility as a spokesperson and at worst elicit suspicion as to what you're hiding. In general, be clear, straightforward and helpful.

Marketing can be a very cost-effective investment which will pay dividends if you get it right.

Think laterally about how you can integrate your communications messages about your business into the broader media coverage of hot, related issues and be ready with information at your fingertips when a journalist calls.

If you plan to handle the media yourself, rather than use a local PR agency, make sure you're available immediately after the release is launched. Have a set of pre-planned Q&As to hand containing the key points, but be ready to answer

Seeing a return on your marketing communications can be very cost-effective. This investment will pay dividends if you get it right, as every individual signing your register is an opportunity to generate added value.

Be clear about what you wish to convey, research your options for disseminating the information and above all show how your business is sympathetic to the needs and desires of your prospective customers.

Further information

AquafreshScienceAcademy.com houses a wealth of materials and resources designed to help you and your team function as an effective dental care unit. Explore our Practice Focus and Patient Focus sections for a range of useful resources.



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