

## **Dental Marketing.... Let's Start with the Fundamentals**

by: *Barbara A. Alba, President,  
WellStar Marketing, Inc.*

As Seen in *Doctor of Dentistry Magazine*  
January/February 2006

There was a time, not too long ago, when the words “dental” and “marketing” would rarely appear in the same sentence. Dentistry was a profession that was built on patient trust and loyalty; marketing was something that used car salesmen and furniture dealers did. Never the ‘twain shall meet.

Today, it's almost impossible to read a dental journal or association website without the formerly unlikely pair popping up all over. There are bonafide experts, even “gurus” of dental marketing. There are practice management firms promising to double your patient base, double your income, and so forth. And it's hard to find two advisors who share the same ideas or strategies. One says that internal marketing is the key; another says that internet marketing is all you need nowadays. What's a dentist to do?

My experience with dental professionals as well as other healthcare and wellness-related practitioners over the past twenty-five years has taught me a few things. First of all, healthcare professionals are typically left-brained, logical thinkers who come up through a science track in college, on the other side of campus from the business school. They are generally more risk-adverse. (These are of course, generalizations, so my apologies to those entrepreneurial-minded, hang gliding dentists out there.) Marketing is often a foreign language and the price tag typically attached to anything “marketing” is enough to scare the lab coat off of any dentist. So suffice it to say that the relatively new coupling of “dental” and “marketing” is often met with, at best, discomfort, at worse, downright terror.

While marketing is as much of an art as it is a science, there are wide ranging variables that can dramatically impact its success. In future issues of this publication, I'll be covering different marketing methods and help provide some clarity around advantages and disadvantages of each, as well as how they can be adapted to a dental environment.

But in this first issue, let's talk about some “truths” that I have found to be self-evident in the dental marketing arena. These will help lay the foundation for future columns and help you evaluate your own marketing efforts (or lack there of).

### ***Cultivate Your Biggest Fans***

First of all, there is no question that the biggest source of new patients comes from referrals. Yet, a great majority of dentists spend virtually no time communicating to their existing patient base. This can be accomplished through simple, relatively inexpensive

means, including billing stuffers, patient letters, strategically placed bulletin boards, “Take One” information cards at the front desk, etc. Keeping your patients informed about training and education programs you’ve completed, new technologies or treatment options now available, new staff members, etc., will keep you top of mind and provide “mental prompts” for a potential referral.

### ***Spruce Up Your Image***

Don’t think image counts? Think again. Having a consistent look to all your patient materials will portray a “personality” for your practice that will gain impact through frequent exposure. Tastefully developed materials should be available to describe your practice for new patients and be available to mail out when potential patients call and ask you to “send me something.” A website is practically de rigueur nowadays. Patients expect to be able to look you up on the internet to get to know you and your practice and to get directions to your office. Invest in outside assistance to be sure your materials appear professional and are well written from a patient’s perspective.

### ***Enlist Your Staff***

There is an expression in marketing, called “living the brand,” which means that there is a consistent manifestation of the image that you are creating surrounding your “brand”, i.e., the personality you want to project surrounding your practice, in all points of contact that your patients have. To do this, you need to enlist your staff in the marketing process. They need to understand and BELIEVE the marketing messages you create. They need to be on the same page in terms how you want your practice to be perceived by your current patient base as well as the outside world. Integrating marketing discussions in your regular staff meetings is the first step to that end. But it goes beyond that. In a future column, I will be addressing the issue of “living the brand” for your dental practice.

Now that dental marketing is a reality for most if not all practices, take the time to evaluate whether you have these fundamentals in place before moving your marketing efforts to the next level.

*Barbara Alba is president of WellStar Marketing, a strategic marketing firm based in Yardley, PA, specializing in healthcare and wellness practices. She is a 25-year veteran of marketing and former adjunct professor of marketing and advertising at Holy Family University.*