

'Unlimited New Patients', and 'More Unlimited New Patients'

by Dr. Julian Holmes, BA SocSci, BDS

It is difficult to imagine a time when dentists were not allowed to advertise in the commercial world in which we now find our profession. Yet, that was the case in both the USA and UK just 10 years ago. And those of you in some European Countries will have to wait a little longer even now before you are able to advertise or promote your practices. Ten years ago, we could display a single line in Yellow Pages, and have a dimensionally proscribed professional plate, but that was about it. A few of us tried stepping outside these limits, and very quickly, there was another professional colleague making a formal complaint to our professional body about the unethical and unprofessional misdemeanour! This was of course in the days when we all thought that we were in competition with each other, and at a time when marketing and promotion was thought to be the domain of commercial sales. Marketing was thought by the elders of our profession to be unethical, and unprofessional. Was our position in Yellow Pages, sandwiched between 'Demolition Experts' and 'Department Stores', a nasty coincidence and a plot against our profession? Or was it just plain back luck?

Time has, thankfully for the majority of us, moved on. The enlightened few in our profession, irrespective where we practice our art of dentistry, have realized that we are in competition with all the other calls on our patient's disposable income. But few, if any, of us have had formal training in Advertising, Marketing, Promotion and Copy Writing. True, a glance through many of the dental journals that seem to pile up through the post box, will reveal any number of courses, usually at some vast expense, and in a location that requires a complete day out of the practice. And once there, it is a general chit chat sort of meeting, with very little substance that you can take back to the practice, and use straight from the pages the following day. So wouldn't it be great if we had a book from which we could just pull out a number of projects, that had been tested in a number of different practices (and even countries!), proven to work, that all we were required to do was to fill in our own practice name, address, and be minimally inventive?

Well, now there is. I have read a number of marketing books over the last few years. I am a busy practitioner, running a fully private practice, and the team, which is myself, Amanda, Fran, and Marion wanted to improve the return investment (ROI) we made in the ads we ran.

Those of you who have already been down this route, will know that you can throw a vast amount of money away in advertising incorrectly. We found out this the same as all of you who are reading this. And there is little out there, besides this newsletter, to guide you as to what makes a successful ad differ from an expensive flop. I have 1000 Gems, The Winning Combination, 1001 Way To Market your Services, to name a few. All these books have lists of ideas that have worked for the authors. But not one of them is designed for the busy practitioner who just wants an outline, has a little time to customize it, and then see it be successful. And I have attended hours of Post-Graduate Training, which often includes sections on "Marketing YOUR Practice", both in the UK and in the USA. But even these talks sadly give any real clues why our adverts seemed to fail, and yet the ads in the "Personal Services", or those of the latest offer from the Food Superstore seemed to attract a vast response.

I was giving a presentation to a very attentive audience in Madison last winter at the Slam Dunk Success in Dental Advertising Seminar. And talking immediately after me, was Howie Horrocks. What was really interesting, was that he was not a dentist. Neither had Howie ever worked as a dentist. But what Howie knew inside out, and practiced for the last 15 years, was the art of communication, marketing, advertising and promoting, exclusively with dental practices. Howie had also written a couple of books, so that those of our profession who never went out of our profession who never went out of our practices, could also benefit from his experience. Now I am real sucker for saying "YES!" to calls on my time, so I came home with two of the heaviest books I have ever had to carry through 3 airport lounges and down those never ending passage ways that you seem to only find at the end of a long, tiring flight! It was with relief that I deposited both books by the bedside, and then settled in for a long read.

Howie's first book, "Unlimited New Patient's", is set out as a series of easy to read sections. Each section explores one form of Marketing. Let's take your Yellow Pages advertisement, for example. He shows you awful, poor, good

and great examples. Then Howie shows you how to build and design a simple, but very effective ad that gives the reader a reason to call you, rather than any one of the other ads on the same page. Now I am sure to those professional ad guys and girls, who have made a mysterious sideways step into dentistry as a means to earn their income, all this is really simplistic stuff. But to the likes of myself, this is real dynamite stuff. For throughout the book, and its updated second volume, "More Unlimited New Patients", were easy to follow examples. All I had to do was put in my name, practice name, address, and we were away. I lost a great deal of sleep for the next few nights; first, I could not put the books down, putting yellow post-it notes on almost every page, and second, I was thinking how all these ideas would transform my practice. My team was very perplexed, as the pile of post grew, abandoned and unopened, and yet my nose was firmly stuck in these books. And once they caught sight of the yellow post-it notes, curiosity got the better of them all. Each team member took turns to look at the modules. Their first comment was "why aren't we doing this?" So we pulled out our Yellow Pages ad, pulled it apart, and rebuilt it. Before long, we had redesigned our practice leaflets, and designed a new run of advertisements for our local newspaper. This was January 1999. Within 2 weeks, we saw the number of new patients into the practice rise to 5 per day. We chose a simple technology to attract them in, and following the example in Howie's book, gave them the reason to call us now, rather than later. We are now onto our fourth module, and the rate of new patients into the practice shows no sign of slowing.

Of real interest is the section on how to keep those new patients, once they have chosen to call you, and your existing patients, when a bright new shiny practice opens just down the road. In the UK, we have a number of commercial companies setting up new dental practices all over the country. Dentistry is moving back into the high street like never before. I have read a number of mailings on one e-mail based forum I belong to, where dentists are despairing of the unfair competition these companies will have. Of course they have a vast marketing resource to throw at attracting your potential patients in through their doors. But if used correctly, these books will be a small investment you can make, to help you market, promote and advertise your services.

There is of course, a large section on the design of a WWW site, from a marketing point of view. Now I follow a 'if is not broke, don't fix it' philosophy for a few things. Our web site draws in about 15 new patients a month. It spans close to 400 pages of inter-linked information, and a vast number of links to other related sites. I know that it could be better, but with so many other modules in Howie's book, the overhaul of our web site will have to wait a little longer. With increased awareness by our patients, the range of treatment options, AND our need to compete with other financial demands, sophisticated mail shots and proactive targeting will increase. Internet based information will also become commonplace. In the UK, there are only 40 practices that have an Internet presence. When you consider that there are about 14,000 dental practices in the UK, I'll leave you to work out the marketing advantages here if it is done the right way. My guess is that is the USA, the figures are very similar.

For those of you who still think it will never work, let me tell you my own experience. My practice, Adentec & UK Smiles went on-line in July 1997. To date, over 8400 people have been into our site and on average, our WWW site brings in 15 new quality patients a month. The Internet covers all ages, all social groups.

These books are the ultimate compendium guide to marketing, practice positioning, establishing your practice niche, usp's, and advertising. (you can look up 'niche marketing' and 'usp's' for yourselves in Howie's books!) They are the most stimulating books I have ever read about the business of dentistry and nothing comes close to this collection of ideas. Both books are compelling reading, and Howie's examples had me first laughing that anyone could dream up an ad like that, then of course the smile disappeared when I realised my ads used to be almost the same! The wealth of information contained in these books is unlimited, when compared to the small investment you will make to read them in the comfort of your own homes, and the ideas that flow from an inspired team.

So, it is no accident that as members of the dental profession, we are sandwiched in Yellow Pages at the front end, by the Demolition Experts, and at the back, by the Department Stores. It is the same in the UK, in Africa, and in the USA. I expect it is the same wherever you look. Our patients have choices where to spend their money, and where to have

certain aspects of their dental treatment and care carried out. Our dental practices are no more than a shop front, and we have a number of services that they can purchase. These books will show you how to make sure a proportion of their disposable income is spent in your shop, rather than down the road.