

10 Ways to Attract More Fee-for-Service Patients *by William Howard Horrocks*

There are many marketing approaches you can use to get the patients you really want. But in my years of working with dental practices I've found that the following are consistent winners.

Start With Internal Marketing

1. Talk to your mailing list and it will talk back.

Your first and most cost efficient action is to start with your patients. Marketing to those who are already familiar with you is easier and much more profitable than marketing to strangers (though you still need to do some external marketing). The bottom line: you simply must develop regular communications to your patient base.

This could take the form of a practice newsletter or simply a personal letter from you sent quarterly or, preferably, each month. If you don't yet have your patient list computerized, I urge you to make this a priority. Most software allows you to write one letter to your patients and "mail merge" this letter to hundreds or thousands of patients. Mail merge simply prints the name and address of each patient onto the single letter so your communication is more personal. It's easy and fast.

Don't make this complicated or expensive by thinking you need to hire a design firm to produce a four color, nine page magazine each month. A simple one or two page newsletter is just fine. You can upgrade the quality as you go. The important thing is to start sending something now. Internal marketing is about "upselling" which means selling more dentistry to those who are already buying dentistry from you. Someone who is already happy with your product can be sold more of it and more often. Both you and they will benefit tremendously.

One client of mine stopped sending his newsletter for several years thinking that it was too much trouble for too little return. At my urging he began sending it again and was surprised at the response. There were days he had 10 patients call to set appointments with each mentioning that the

newsletter was what jogged their memory. He learned his lesson! The newsletter will never disappear again.

What to Say

Educate your patient on teeth whitening, bonding, veneers, air abrasion, intraoral cameras, porcelain crowns, white fillings and a host of other dental topics.

Cover one topic per month and be sure to give them a reason to call such as a limited time offer relating to that month's topic. Keep in mind; you can't just say that veneers are great or that inlays are better than fillings.

You've got to tell them what veneers and inlays will do for them (correct stained, chipped and misshapen teeth and replace unsightly amalgams) while at the same time giving them a reason to call you now and not next year ("Call before August 1st and receive a complimentary cosmetic evaluation which will determine if veneers or inlays are for you.")

These letters or newsletters are not meant to take the place of any recall efforts you are already making. Your hygiene recalls are a separate operation, employing postcards and phone calls. The monthly letters or newsletters above are designed to provide information and benefits on major dental treatments and services as well as invite them to call and refer their friends and family into the practice.

2. Seeking referrals. You can and should be asking for referrals from your existing patients.

This goes for the staff too. Over and over again I've proven to myself that the vast majority of patients are more than willing to help you. They are not put off when you ask them to help. However it's sometimes uncomfortable to simply ask. Why not give the patient something to take with them that they can pass along to their friends or family members? Hand them a dental health certificate and ask that they give it to someone "Nancy, you're a great patient. Why don't you give this to one of your friends or someone you care about?"

It will allow them to receive a dental exam at an introductory offer. I

recommend you make this handout more substantial than a simple business card. If it's too small or flimsy the patient may just toss it.

Give them something that looks like a check or a certificate. Make it look important (because it is.) When their friend or family member arrives (not just schedules but actually shows up) send the referring patient two tickets to a first run movie, or a restaurant gift certificate along with a personal note of thanks. Or send flowers, coffee mugs or something else people would value. Let's say you get referred a huge case that ends up being many thousands of dollars. You may want to reward the referrer with a \$300 day spa or \$500 Nordstrom shopping certificate.

Whatever you do the referring patient ends up getting a benefit, which means they are more likely to refer again. Send these rewards to their work address (not home). That way more people get to find out how generous you are. Bottom line: Don't let patients leave your practice empty handed.

3. Photos, photos everywhere. Before and after photos should line the walls of your reception area and operatories.

When people see the difference between a mouthful of amalgams versus "white fillings" while they are waiting, they'll be more receptive once they're 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.

Likewise with teeth whitening, a nice set of comparison photos make it much easier to sell this service. Also have photo albums of your best cases along with testimonials from the patients. They don't all have to be your patients either. You can describe veneers, whitening, inlays and bonding until you're blue in the face but it won't be half as effective as a good before and after photo.

4. Educate and motivate.

A nice addition to your photo gallery is patient education on video or CD. Continuous loop video or a CD presentation on the benefits of modern cosmetic dentistry, running non-stop on your reception room, will not only

distract a waiting patient but will also show them how good their smiles could look. The same presentations in the operatories will also raise dental IQ. You've essentially got a captive audience so whenever you need to leave the rooms, even for a couple of minutes, simply turn it on.

Remember, this is the video age, people will watch anything that's on a TV screen, especially if there is nothing else to do and particularly if it's right in front of them.

5. Don't be afraid, just call them.

You've heard this before and will hear it again, from me. Call everyone you numbed that day. This is a simple phone call made the evening after treatment.

Ask them how they are doing, has the anesthesia worn off, do they have any questions, how does the bite feel and so on. You really want to know if anything is wrong so you can fix it right away - before they decide to go to another practice and bad mouth you. Some dentists think the patient will see these calls as an intrusion. This is simply not true. Patients, just like any human being, appreciate having attention paid to them. In fact, you could say that the degree you give someone your attention is the degree they give you their admiration and money.

External Marketing

Your practice can hum along quite nicely for a long time on a referral only basis. However some external marketing usually needs to be done in order to make up for natural attrition. Rather than go over old ground in regards to Yellow Pages ads or ValPak mailers I want to focus attention on other ways to reach the people who need, want and can afford the dentistry you want to deliver.

6. Using the press.

Sending regular press releases to all print and electronic media in your area can help focus public attention on dentistry in general and your practice in specific. An earlier article discussed the correct way to prepare a news

release. To that I can only add that it be done on a continual basis. Send so many that you become very familiar to all the editors in your area.

You can even get fax software that will store all the numbers of the editors and media outlets in your area so once you have your release written you need only press a button and it automatically goes out to all the editors in your area.

The subjects you write about must be of interest to people and not simply an advertisement for your practice. But realize that what is old hat 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" would be good if you want to talk about the increased interest in cosmetic dentistry. Any time there is national press attention about dentistry, take advantage of it on your local level with a press release. For example, the FDA recently approved the use of lasers for more than just curing composites. Now, if you have a laser then this bit of exposure affords you the opportunity to call attention to your practice. A nice headline might be, "Sioux City Dentist Goes High Tech With Newly Approved Laser."

But what if you don't have a laser? You can still take advantage of the national exposure by promoting what you do have and tying it in with the laser.

"Star Wars Era Comes To Dentistry" could be a headline. The release would talk about the recent FDA approved laser but would then go on to mention other advancements such as miracle composites, air abrasion, intraoral cameras, multimedia presentations, computer smile design and so on.

You can create very positive effects for dentistry in general and your practice specifically with the use of press releases. It's also a very 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 mailing piece, professionally done, can be

used for years. You don't have to have a high response rate for this to pay off. Even at less than one percent you can still 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. And don't be discouraged if it doesn't pull well right off the bat. Even though it's maddening, repetition is essential in advertising. You may have to try two or three different cards until you get one that brings you a decent response. If you ask an agency to design a mailing they will usually present you with three ideas. Ask them to produce the one you like the best, but in case it doesn't pull well get them to agree to let you use the other two ideas as tests. Test all three and settle on the one that yields the best response.

Target your mailings to areas near your practice, which are affluent enough to afford full care dentistry. You can also target people who have recently moved into your area. TRW has a great service called Redi Comps (800-345-7334), which will tell you about all the new homeowners in your area and the value of each property. This way you weed out the areas that are apartment heavy or are otherwise undesirable. This assures that your mailings get to your target market. There are other firms specializing in new movers specifically for the health professions.

Try ProMail at 800-258-0060 or your local mail 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, an upscale hair salon or talent agency will help you contact just the type of patient you've been seeking. With surgeons you call and ask if you can refer your patients and would they like to talk to you about this.

You can request to witness a surgery, and 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 you can offer to whiten the owner's teeth in exchange for displaying your photo album and distributing your dental health certificates. Chiropractors are often open to this kind of

referral arrangement. Choose a practice that is already doing well, not one that is struggling.

You could do an endorsement mailing to your patients about the other practice. The chiropractor could do a similar mailing to his or her patients about you. Include a certificate for an exam in each mailing. Establishing these types of relationships always and 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 would be a good idea to approach them and offer your services. One huge advantage you have is that you are near where they work. If you have extended hours they could come in before or after work. It's a great convenience for them. Point out this fact in a short letter or invitation. Have one of your staff hand deliver this invitation (which includes an offer of 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 the kind of patient who seeks cosmetic and full care dentistry. You won't be viewed as cutting edge or even modern with a 1950s dental chair and chipped linoleum in your operatories. I'm not suggesting that you have to rush out and immediately buy every new toy or gadget that comes along. However, you should set aside funds throughout the year for major equipment purchases.

This also includes new treatments that are becoming increasingly popular such as teeth whitening and halitosis treatment. The addition of the latest treatments and equipment can also get you attention in the press, especially if you are the first in your area to acquire the new technology or you're the first to send out the 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. The new hard tissue lasers fall into this category as well.

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

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