



The Importance of Branding

By Carl Burroughs

Dentistry in Australia is at a cross roads and the choices that doctors make in the next five years will shape the sort of experience they have in dentistry for the rest of their careers. One of these choices that doctors have to make is how they market their practice.

There is no right way to run a practice except for profitability of course, but practices are having to and will have to be much more conscious of the messages they are giving out from their practices.

Every practice has an image, however many of the practices I visit, the doctor is not conscious of the image the practice portrays. It is this that has to change.

As a society, we are all getting more and more sophisticated. If we look at a simple thing as coffee, gone are the days of 'white with one', now everyone has their personal choice, a skimmed café latte with a twist of lemon or whatever!

This sophistication is also becoming true of dentistry. There was a time that the usual trip to a dental practice was full of fear, the practice you would visit would be drab and unwelcoming and the chances are the patient would only go there because they were in pain or they thought you had to.

Now, the practice I describe still exists however today we also have the choice to go to a dental spa and receive a foot massage before a scale and clean. More and more people are choosing to have their teeth whitener and society as a whole is become aware that they can now choose their dental experience.

At Integrated Dental Marketing (IDM) we help dental practices through this process of change, making sure that the practice knows that everything they do, say or hand out is part of the experience the patient goes through and to be aware of this.

Marketing a dental practice is much more involved than placing an ad in the Yellow Pages. It is really about the experience offered to the patient and attracting the patients who want that experience. What I am talking about today are the elements of the 'experience'.

Branding

Traditionally dental practices have gone to market using just the doctor's name or the more adventurous practices have maybe used the suburb that they currently reside in, i.e. Blacktown Dental. Both these methods are seriously flawed in modern dentistry.

Firstly, trading just as the doctors name seriously affects the ability for the practice to expand and also the future sale price of the practice when it is sold.

Many times when I am called in to help a practice it is because the practice wants to expand and is struggling with the process due to the historic relationship the doctor has created with his or her clients. Simply put, if the practice has Dr Jones on the door, the patients want to see Dr Jones and not the associate or hygienist.

Building a brand that sits between the doctor and the clients allows for much more flexibility and allows for defined philosophies and standards to be created. LITERALLY, THIS IS HOW WE DO IT HERE.

The process of creating a 'brand' is not quickly making up and creating a logo, it is actually the process of thinking about what they practice stands for and what the patient's experience is going to be. This process can be very daunting for a practice to go through but one of the most beneficial things they can do.

The second reason for building a brand is as an exit strategy. Traditionally as a dentist is starting to think of retirement, the age group of the patients he or she is treating are also thinking of retirement. This coupled with all the patients relating to the individual doctor equates to a final sale price of the practice that does not reflect a lifetime of hard work.



When a meaningful brand has been built and managed, the individual doctor is less important in the equation. Every business should be run as if the end goal is to sell it and dentistry is no different.

When your brand exists with or without you, you know you have got it right and you have a tangible asset.

In choosing a name to become your brand there are also a few tricks. Firstly, flexibility is the key. Blacktown Dental Centre is fine in the sense that it does not rely on the individual dentist's name to market itself, where it falls down is when Blacktown Dental Centre wants to open a surgery in Double Bay. All the years of marketing, good will and brand awareness are instantly lost and the practice has to start from scratch.

A name that is not bound by geographic restraints has a much better chance to succeed and a long-term brand.

Choose a name that reflects what you do and what clients you want to attract. Certain words and images attract certain people. If you are looking for a sophisticated, stylish patient, choose a name and imagery that is sophisticated and stylish.

So by now you have a new name, a logo and imagery that reflects who you are and who you want to be and most importantly you have been through the process of defining your business and the standards and philosophies that it reflects.

The next step is to introduce this brand to the community and this is what we call marketing.

When I first started to do this a couple of years ago, I would boldly go into a dental practice and say 'what you need is some marketing'. The response to this word marketing was, shall we say, interesting; most reactions were like I had suggested that we open a McDonalds outlet within the practice. 'We are too professional for marketing' was the message.

Today, I have not changed my message at all but I am now very careful to explain that marketing a McDonalds and a dental practice are two totally different things, although interestingly they share the same principles, just applied differently.

Building a brand takes time and also a consistent commitment to the process. Money also plays a role but often nothing like what is expected. Depending what product or service a business provides, the rule of thumb is that you should spend

about 10% of the businesses forecasted gross turnover on marketing. Although this figure would create a wonderful and adequate marketing plan for a dental practice and I do have clients who spend this amount with us, an excellent marketing campaign can be achieved for about half this amount.

The other thing about marketing a dental practice is that the campaign can become cheaper given time, with most practices I start with nothing, so the initial costs to set up the collateral, such as website and brochures are all incurred in the first year but often have a life of up to five years, which means the budget for the second year can be less to achieve the same results or more ideally, the budget remains the same but can be used in even more creative ways.

At IDM, we create a lot of 'stuff' for our clients, brochures, websites, posters, adverts etc. however it's not about having this 'stuff' it's about using it. A website might have some great information on it, useful tools for the patients and lots of reasons to go to the practice however if nobody ever sees it then what's the point.

My job is to create a program not only to design the tools needed to market a practice but to also implement them.

As I mentioned earlier, branding is a great way of allowing a practice to grow and can also add value when it comes to sell, but why else would you spend money on marketing?

Well, there are lots of answers to this but they all end up with the same meaning, which is what do you want to achieve and why?

Understanding your patients and the understanding the patients you want to attract is a starting point.

It's not about more clients it's about more of the patients you want. Currently in Australia, there is a shortage of dentists; many of my clients cannot expand, as they cannot find young doctors to join their practice, so just attracting MORE patients is not the answer. It's pulling from society the patients you want to look after and also the patients that are going to be good for the practice long term. Just remember who your clients are, is your choice.

If you would like to know more about how to create your own brand or want to discuss any of your marketing needs, Carl can be contacted on (02) 9211 1477 or by email on carl@dentalmarketing.com.au.

