



Do you have a Marketing Plan?

By Carl Burroughs

'Fail to plan is a plan to fail'- these were some of the first words of wisdom I heard when I took on my first sales role at the age of 16 in a traditional firm of Estate Agents back in the Yorkshire town of Beverly. I took these words to heart and have always found that whenever I write a detailed plan on what I want to achieve, the result I desire arrives with ease rather than when left to chance or I try to carry the plan in my head. At that age my plan was to buy my own house and start my own business. I took my peers advice and wrote down what I wanted to achieve and how I thought I would achieve it. Looking back now, my plan was not very sophisticated, but by 18 I owned my first house and very soon afterwards started my first company.

Planning every aspect of your practice, and indeed your life, is important, however in business there is no plan more important than a marketing plan. The reason is simple- it is through a marketing plan that you determine what your practice stands for, who you want to attract to your practice and how you are going to achieve this. When I have asked many of the doctor's I meet "do you have a marketing plan", the response often involves an answer along the lines of "Well, we are planning to spend \$7,000 in the Yellow Pages and do some local newspaper advertising". Now don't get me wrong, this is better than doing nothing at all, but it is not exactly a plan. Without a formalised plan, it will be impossible to determine whether the Yellow Pages and local newspaper advertising has attracted enough patients AND the sort of patients you want to attract.

A proper marketing plan will help you identify where you are now, where you want to be and how you propose to get there. It also gives you measurement criteria to assess your practices performance.

Here are eight steps to writing a marketing plan: -

1. Understand where you are NOW

The first step is to understand where you are now. What is the state of your practice and the environment in which you operate? The best way to answer these questions is by using a SWOT analysis. (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)

A SWOT analysis is a simple list of your practices strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that currently exist. Strengths and weaknesses are things that are internal to your practice; opportunities and threats are things that are external to your practice. Here are some examples of strengths and weaknesses:

- Brand awareness and local market share
- Services provided

- Marketing practices
- Quality of your database
- Your team
- Organisational structure
- Practice size and profitability
- Training

A practice's strengths might include, the experience and continuing education of the doctor, latest technology and equipment, extended hours, customer parking, credit facilities and really friendly staff. Weaknesses could include, poor communication skills, lack of brand awareness, little or no patient education tools, and non-inspiring surroundings.

When doing this for the first time, it is easy to be generous on the side of the strengths of the practice and frugal on the side of the weaknesses. I recommend that you are ruthless and objective in your summation of these characteristics.

Opportunities and threats vary depending on your practice and are often things that are beyond your control. However, recognising them allows you to deal with them to your advantage. Examples include: -

- Economic and political influences
- Cultural and social influences
- Developments in technology
- Market trends
- Competitor activity

A good example of an opportunity would be if a new housing development had just been created in your area. Depending on the style of development, this might bring new young families into your area, families that may be moving away from their current dentist or even have not been to the dentist for some time, as is now a trend in the twenty something's age group. A simple letter introducing yourself and your practice will capitalise on these potential new patients before they get around to doing their own research.



By recognising opportunities and threats in your area you can take advantage of the opportunities and protect against the threats.

You will notice that your SWOT analysis paints a clear picture of your current business. You can see, at a glance, the strengths you can use to your advantage, the weaknesses you need to address, the opportunities for growing your practice and the threats you need to take in to account.

2. Determine your objectives

Your objectives are a statement of where you are aiming to go, they are your goals. Your SWOT analysis will give you the basis for setting your marketing objectives. These objectives must be written down in a way that can be measured and defined by a time frame.

Be mindful not to generalise objectives; statements such as 'I want to increase sales' have little or no value, as they are not defined. A real objective should read 'I want to increase my hourly production from \$150 per hour to \$400 per hour by the end of 2005 through attracting more restorative cases to the practice'. This gives you a clear understanding of what you are aiming to achieve, what procedures you will need to attract to the practice or identify within the practice and a time frame in which you want to achieve this.

3. What is your target market?

Marketing objectives are impossible to achieve unless you clearly know who your target audience is. Are you trying to attract new patients to the practice or mobilise your existing database. If you want to attract new patients to the practice, who are they? What age group do you want to see? What is their yearly income? What type of procedures do you wish to perform? If you want to mobilise your existing database to come back to the practice more often then the same questions still apply. By determining exactly who you want in your practice will help determine how you attract them.

"Hang on a minute, I can't determine who I treat, my doors are open to all"

Well we might disagree on this, however if that is your point of view all the same principles apply. I am not saying that you should only treat a certain type of patient, but that you should be fully aware of who you want to treat. If your message is 'open to all', this is as important to articulate as 'implants only please'.

A fun way of determining who your target market is and how you relate to them is to write down all the 'other' brands that your target patient would use, what car do they drive? Where do they holiday? Where do they shop? This is often one of the easiest ways of picturing who you are trying to attract and is definitely the easiest way to explain to a third party such as a marketing consultant or advertising medium.

The next step to determine is what is the state of your database? Can you contact your patients and prospective patients easily? If your database system is not up to date or is not easy to use, this is an area that will need addressing.

4. Determine your strategy

Strategy is simply how you go about achieving your objectives. Always try to write your strategy as a single-minded statement. The more concise you can make your strategy statement, the easier it will be to develop tactics to support it.

If your objective is to fill your hygienists diary as they are only currently working at a 50% capacity then your strategy might be to 'become the preferred preventive dental practice for 20 to 30 year olds in your area'.

When writing your strategy, keep it simple and try to describe it in one statement. This is not an easy process; you can expand on your strategy in a paragraph following the headline, but always aim to be single-minded in the first instance.

5. Tactics

Your tactics are 'what you do' to achieve your objectives. They must follow directly from your strategy. Remember, objectives are 'where' you are aiming to go, strategy is 'how' you are going to get there and your tactics are 'what you do' to get there. Your tactics must be budgeted individually so you can measure their performance.

Let's take a look at the hygienist example- you want to become the preferred preventive dental practice for 20 to 30 year olds in your area. Your tactics may include creating a special 'Hygiene Package', you might give that package a name such as 'Clean Smile Therapy' and you might create a special price for this (not necessarily a discount price, but a special price that may include a hygiene kit for example). The next area of your tactics would be to determine how you would market this new package, this could include: -



- Direct mail to local apartment blocks
- Flyer drop at your local train station
- Mail your existing database.
- Approaching large local companies and asking them to put the offer on their staff notice board and entrance.
- Approaching local Gyms to display a poster with the offer on.
- Local glossy magazine ad and editorial
- And so on....

6. Budget

One of the most difficult things to determine is how much you should spend, especially if you have not previously had a marketing budget in your overall business plan. When allocating your budget, you must start with your objectives. What can you afford to invest to achieve the objectives you have set? How much are you prepared to spend to create a new patient? How much to keep a patient? The budget you allocate will affect the type of tactics you can afford to achieve your goals, and therefore the most appropriate media to use.

Each tactic must be costed to ensure that it fits the budget. Then establish clearly defined, desired results and a tracking system. It is only by tracking the results that can you determine the cost-effectiveness of your campaigns and therefore whether to repeat them again.

7. Tracking and reporting

When you write your marketing plan, you need to establish how you will measure your activity and report the results. If you can't measure it, how can you manage it?

Establish procedures to record all responses, including telephone, mail, fax, e-mail and walk in enquires. Make sure that your team are fully aware and involved in the campaign and know how to respond to enquiries. Your tracking procedure can be as simple as a manual checklist at your front desk or a fully computerised system. Whichever way you choose, make sure that it is easy to follow and that it does get done. Keep on top of the results on a daily basis (although don't judge your success on a daily basis), discuss the results at your morning meetings and then when the

campaign is over sit back and analyse the results.

8. Celebrate

Yes, celebrate! Buy some champagne for Friday afternoon, or take your team out for dinner. When implementing a marketing plan for the first time it is important that everyone in your organisation understands the benefits of it. One person who does not value the campaign or is sceptical in any way can destroy the results. Plus, if you have achieved the results you have planned it's good to celebrate. It internalises the benefits to the organisation. Treat yourself as well, hire a Ferrari for the weekend (buy one if the results are really good!) or go for a massage- after all, it is you who has created this shift in your business.

Finally, in the words of George S. Patton 'A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan next week'.

Carl Burroughs is the managing director of Integrated Dental Marketing (IDM) and can be contacted on (02) 9211 1477 or e-mail carl@dentalmarketing.com.au. Also, for more information on the services provided by IDM visit www.dentalmarketing.com.au.

