



PART FIVE
IN A SERIES

10 deadly sins in dental marketing

Strategies for boosting your business, your image and your profits

By Dr Genna Levitch

Having established that the professions are active and powerful marketers, we went back to the seven P's of marketing to understand what we actually do. What we do is provide a service, not sell a product. Services can only be sold on the basis of credibility.

Any aspect of your marketing that does not reinforce the credibility of your practice will detract from the potential response.

Unfortunately, there are also 10 Deadly Sins of Marketing that are unique to the professions. Commit one of these and your reputation and credibility is dashed.

The market sciences have studied the position of the professional service provider for over 100 years and have identified the following 10 distinctive problems that make marketing of professional services different from any other industry.

1. Third Party Accountability

We are not alone in the surgery, satisfying the needs of our patients. Standing in the corner of the surgery are our other clients:

- APHRA;
- The state dental boards;
- Our professional indemnity insurer;
- Teams of lawyers;
- Government regulators; and of course
- Our colleagues down the road.

They are there to protect the patient from themselves and occasionally from us. To be successful, we need to satisfy both our patients and the third party "clients".

These are important checks and balances that apply to any professional. A doctor cannot keep prescribing narcotics, an engineer cannot accede to demands from a cost-cutting developer to use unsafe materials and an accountant cannot overlook a client's financial irregularities. All professionals need to satisfy both their actual clients and third party clients equally. Over-doing your service to one client will lead to loss of trust from the other.

This is part of our long-term credibility. We are responsible to third parties who in turn provide comfort and protection to our patients. Weave this into your marketing and it establishes a safe and ethical environment. Over do it and it will seem that you are inviting complaints or litigation.

2. Client uncertainty

People face uncertainty in all types of buying situations, but the uncertainty is particularly high for buyers of professional services as it is so hard to evaluate the service due to its "intangibility". Even after the fact, most patients have difficulty in assessing the quality/value of the service.

This uncertainty develops into an anxiety known in marketing circles as "post-purchase dissonance". It appears before but is most noticeable after the purchase decision. It is imperative that the professional service provider works to relieve this anxiety and reassure the patient that the choice was the correct one. The three ways of providing this assurance are:

1. Patient education;
2. Patient follow-up; and
3. Testimonials.

This patient uncertainty provides a unique challenge and corresponding opportunity. The dentist who includes these crucial points in their marketing brief will be streets ahead of the pack. Understanding this aspect of patient anxiety is right outside of the usual dental phobias we know so well. This is not a clinical anxiety and does not have a clinical solution. Sometimes patients need to be educated about what they need to seek out in the services of a professional. A non-dental person does this best. A third party has more credibility since it is perceived that they have nothing to gain and can be trusted. This is the reason that treatment plan presenters, educational brochures and clinical notes on web sites are so successful. They do not necessarily educate, but they do reduce anxiety. Reduce the anxiety and acceptance will follow.

Patient follow-up allows you to reinforce that the correct treatment was done, the correct decisions were made, and the correct practitioner was seen. How else is the patient to know? Assurance, support through follow up contact relieves some of the uncertainty the patient is experiencing. Guarantees are difficult to weave into marketing material, but testimonials do the same work. If you have patients who have put their thanks in writing, use it. A testimonial with a photo is more powerful than one without a name. The most powerful testimonials are those by a famous person known to your demographic.

Be aware that under current legislation, testimonials are forbidden in web, print or social media.



3. Experience essential

Out of all the criteria that are used by patients to select a dentist, the most prominent considered is the dentists' prior experience. The question foremost in the patients mind is: "has the dentist done this procedure previously?"

Why is it if you get to be good at dentures, you get a never-ending stream of edentulous patients? Your reputation is doing this for you. The question is how to create marketing that will do the same: convince a wider range of patients that you have a great reputation without being restricted to word-of-mouth. Testimonials will do this for you.

The other problem that "experience" poses is that it makes it difficult to move into new areas or diversify the range of treatment offered. "Newness" cannot be readily promoted as a favorable attribute in the professions. This situation means that extensive market planning is required to determine the market potential of new specialized services.

4. Limited differentiability

Offering a service that enables the public to differentiate you from other dentists is especially difficult. Have a look again at the ads in the Yellow Pages. The same services are listed in each ad and

they even look the same! They are no help for potential patients who are already experiencing great uncertainty.

What do you have that can help them differentiate? You may well have a unique location, your premises may have been custom-designed and you certainly have a unique personality.

But beyond our professional training, patients want to see our human face. Marketing which emphasises your individualism and practice character is hard to find and expensive to effect, but it is worth it. To look and sound different is the key to any successful marketing campaign.

5. Maintaining quality control

Patients know everyone has a bad day. Showing them before and after photos does not guarantee that it will be the same for them. What they want to know is what you have in place if they happen to be the unlucky one. What do you have in place to give them security? What happens if something goes wrong? Will you be honest about what went wrong, will you offer to repair at no cost?

To be candid, I do not believe it is possible to cover this aspect in your advertising, however it is easy to include your policy on this subject within your marketing collateral: practice brochure, website and educational material.

The only way to maintain quality control in a people-intensive service industry is to find good people and exhort them continuously to provide excellent service. This does not necessarily mean high wages, but it does mean a remuneration that exceeds market expectations. The most important factor for staff satisfaction is to be heard. Why do so many larger companies have staff meetings, performance reviews, KPI's, strategy meetings, debriefings, staff management retreats, professional training days and the like. What these do is allow staff to be heard. Unloading means less stress, better communication, higher attention and greater job fulfillment.

Saying in your marketing that you care and then having staff that deliver a personalized service is more powerful than you can imagine.

In the next issue we look at the other five restraints professionals must exercise. Answer these issues for you patients and it removes their apprehension.

About the author

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