



The seven sons of marketing

Strategies for boosting your business, your image and your profits

By Dr Genna Levitch

Over the past century, an extensive body of knowledge has accumulated about why people buy certain services; why they return; and what influences their decisions.

Dentistry has not been interested in this information as until relatively recently, we were prohibited from advertising. There has not been time for marketing lore and expertise to become part of the professional landscape. Yet the demand is starting to grow as practices find that they are defined by their presentation, be it considered or accidental.

Word of mouth and clinical excellence was considered to be the proper route to achieve the goal of a decent and modest success. This produced a colourless uniformity and required no attention from dentists. That has started to change as the laws were relaxed but unfortunately, not all practices are the same. Left with normal market forces, some have blossomed as others start to fade. Some dentists have seen their practices expand beyond belief. Others have found that advertising, such as the Yellow Pages, is expensive and not always cost effective. The content as well as the vehicle for the ad are both important. As the vehicle changes, so must the content. As the scope of possibilities being explored is becoming clear, there is not one 'silver bullet' solution but rather the key to success is in finding the right mix of marketing initiatives.

Into this vacuum, a range of marketers have entered to assist dentists in finding a mix that works. Often this is opportunistic, novelty or impulse driven with scant regard for the fundamentals that underpin marketing. The purpose of this series is

to provide a semi-academic background to the science of marketing so that dentists can begin to develop their marketing programs in an holistic and structured manner. The "holy grail" of marketing is to find a mix of initiatives that can not only bring patients through the door, but also bring in the "right" ones. In other words, to position your practice where you want it to be in the market place. When this occurs, it can produce astounding results, whose impact is far greater than the sum of its parts. There are practices that have hundreds of new patients a month. How can you also tap into that pool of demand?

It starts with understanding the process of exchange between a dentist and a patient as presented in the previous article. The next step is to understand that the Seven P's of Marketing encompasses the full scope of marketing tools (Figure 1).

The *Product* or Service is clinical dentistry. 60% of dentists in Australia are generalists; they will try to do everything on the ADA item list. It is nearly impossible to differentiate yourself from the vast bulk of these dentists. We all receive the same undergraduate training. We can all handle a drill. Jane Public (the wife makes these decisions) looks at our phone book ads and sees the identical list of services for dozens of dentists. How does she choose? Probably by what stands out - colour, photos, catch phrase, logo, the "feel" of the thing. Everything except the clinical list. Jane Public is scared of what we do; doesn't understand how it's done. Educating her via an ad is impossible. The nuances of what we do is out of her reach. She employs the other six P's to make a decision.

The *Price* is not just the money and it is more than high or discount prices. It includes the cost as well. The cost of lost time, difficulty in finding a parking spot, the level of private health cover, credit card facilities, patent finance, HICAPS, guarantees and the payment period all contribute, in the patients' mind, to factors that increase or decrease the cost.

The accessibility of your practice, in every sense, defines how your *Place* constructs in a patients' mind. It includes everything a practice does to make itself available to the patient. This means not only what your location says about you, but is it ground floor or walk up; what are the hours of operation; the length of time it takes to answer a call; or do you have a web site to easily download information?

The activities that communicate the merits of the service and persuade patients to purchase are *Promotional*. It is the traditional advertising seen in the print media, promoting yourself, teams or events; educational ADA brochures or signage that dentists think of when marketing is mentioned. The key here is to be sure that all forms of promotion are properly integrated so they all communicate the same image and core message.

The *Physical Evidence* makes up for the fact that a service is inherently intangible. Patients tend to look for clues that will indicate the quality of the service they wish to obtain. The immediate clue is the practice's presentation and furnishings. Your premises say more about you than you can yourself. We are all highly tuned to our environment. Lots of accessible counters, bright lights, big pictures of simple food and plastic seating means

we're in a fast-food establishment. Stone floors, subdued natural light, lofty ceilings, communal seating means we must be in a cathedral. We have different emotions in each of these architecturally defined spaces. The emotions our patients feel when they walk into our practice will dominate their decision to purchase, postpone or decline our clinical skills. Sad but true!

A close relative stopped seeing a local dentist because he wasn't wearing a belt. "How can I trust him with my cosmetic work when he looks like a nerd?" was her judgement. How indeed? Her decision, although based on the wretched (lack of) belt, was surprisingly accurate. He wasn't a dental "belt and braces" man, let alone a credible cosmetic operator.

Every organization has *Processes* in which it does business. Every practice has its own way of processing patients and a patient's data. The way we do this has a significant effect on patient perception. For example, the efficiency, commonsense and ease of completion of your patient history form tells the patient how much you pay attention to detail. It may tell them your processes are nearly random, they can expect chaotic appointment schedules and there will be apologies at every turn.

With professional services, the *People* who provide the services are enormously important. With professional services, most patients cannot tell the difference between the service and the provider. An advertising account manager may be described as holding a job while an orthodontist is the job. Patients tend to choose observable personal characteristics to help them make a decision. Some patients prefer to choose a practitioner similar to them selves. "If he's like me, he will do the right thing by me like I would" is the unconscious thought. Women may choose females practitioners, as they believe females will be more highly attuned to their needs. Some observe if their peers are in the waiting room and decide if they are in the right company.

Two rules grow out of the Seven P's. The first is that you must employ marketing research to gain the insight and knowledge to find the right combination for your practice. No one has the budget and luxury to employ a hit and miss approach. The second is that by the time you find the ideal mix, so will your competitors

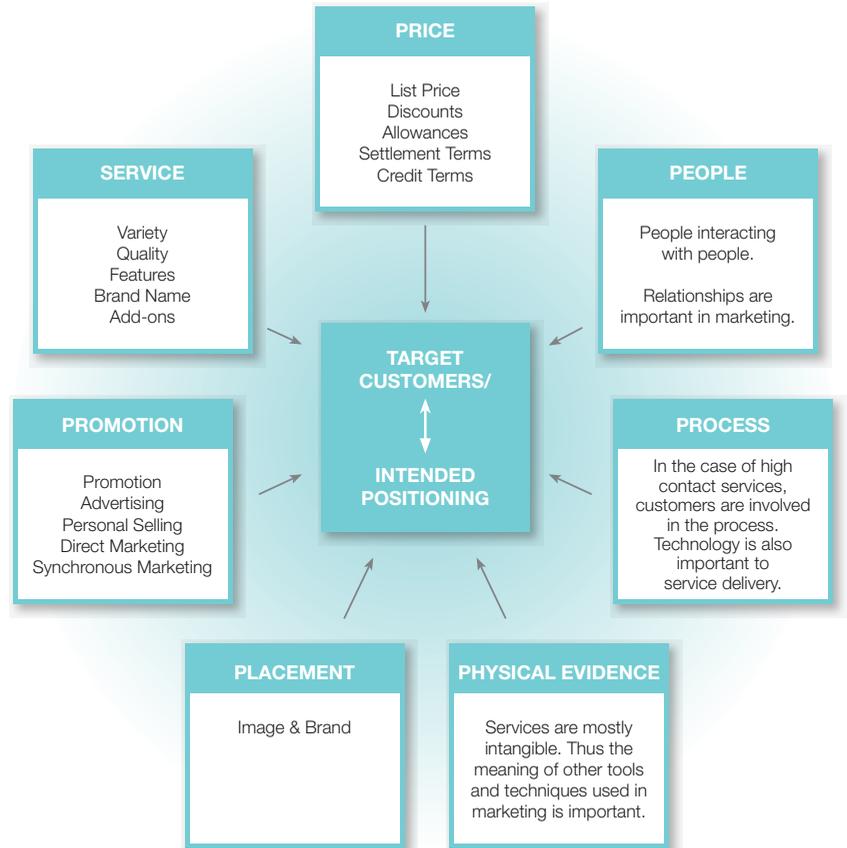


Figure 1. The 7 "P"s of services marketing.

and they will introduce new processes, features or prices that will change patient expectations. The implication being that as professional service providers, we must be constantly absorbing and reflecting market intelligence.

The clinical *Product* is only one of seven equally weighted areas that influence a patient's choice, yet we are still surrounded by equipment, material or technique seminars and courses all aimed at improving clinical results. We are all in favour of optimal clinical outcomes, but it turns out it is the weakest parameter available to patients who want to make a choice. In the main, the profession is oriented towards the hard end of the skill spectrum. As graduates without an anti-advertising mind-set and more sophisticated marketing services enter the profession, a different type of dental practice will emerge. Early adopters in the

profession are already showing us what it looks like.

A crucial part of this change is redefining what we as dentists actually do. Do we provide a service or sell a product?

In the next article, we will look at what constitutes a service or a product. How a definition in itself can reformulate how we perceive the profession and even make or break our long-term ability to adapt.

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