

What's the Word on the Street About Your Practice?



How getting involved in your community can help you attract new patients By Betty Zuelke

In the “old days” (25 to 30 years ago), orthodontists thought that if they were great clinicians, if they created board-quality clinical results, and if they built a pretty office, marketing for new patients would handle itself. In fact, that was often the way it was back then. Today, the idea that new orthodontic patients will automatically show up on your doorstep is a fantasy for the great majority of the profession. Today’s orthodontists—and their teams—must work hard to build their new-patient flow.

While the topic of marketing has been discussed over and over again for many years now, the orthodontic profession has gone through an evolution in the last 15 years, and orthodontic marketing must keep pace with that evolution to keep you at the top of the heap in your community. Successful practices do not wait for their telephone to ring—they make their telephone ring.

You have heard that it is important to have “internal” games running continually in your practice. You have also heard that entertaining your general dentists and other professional referral sources is what “external” marketing is all about. I believe a missing piece to the puzzle is “community” marketing, which gets neglected because many practices think marketing within the community is all about the taboo called advertising. In our increasingly fast-paced world of working parents, smartphones, iPads, and Facebook, marketing within your community does not have to be viewed as taboo if it is done professionally. I am not talking about advertising on a banner on the side of a city bus, paying for ad space on the back of a pharmacy prescription bag, being the guest speaker for radio talk shows, or putting up a billboard. While all of these advertising forms of marketing work, they bring in what is called “curious shoppers,” most of whom are looking for something inexpensive.

Positive Name Recognition

As you begin to think about marketing within your community, you must first recognize the difference between advertising and creating positive name recognition, which is what quality marketing is all about. Most potential patients with the “dental IQ” that an orthodontist wants will wonder what is wrong with the orthodontist who has to put his or her face on a billboard to solicit new patients, or who offers discounts through random postcard mailers, or conducts other forms of retail-type advertising. Potential patients feel that if a doctor has to advertise to attract patients, then he or she must not be able to attract patients through a solid reputation and clinical excellence.

In today’s world, where parents sometimes shop for price at a cheaper practice because they feel the treatment plan sounds the same as yours, you must differentiate your treatment and your results from the ordinary. You must recreate your practice’s image as the “popular practice.” It’s up to you to create the word on the street about your practice. You must decide that you are going to be the most popular, the most excellent (and not the least expensive!) orthodontic practice in the community. Popularity is a decision you must make every morning when you wake up. Each day you must involve your team and create a game plan to focus on how many times the telephone will ring with new patients calling.

Your practice’s image has a lot to do with driving patients to your front door. As you integrate your practice’s name and popularity into the life of the community, you will be the practice that moms talk about. Moms influence other moms about not only child-raising technique and purchasing decisions, but also about who’s the best orthodontist in town. Moms are the ones who can give your practice the *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval. Let moms see that you give back to the community through the schools, local events, fund-raisers, sports involvement, donations of your time, and activities, and your office will be the “cool place” to go.

Community Schools

Research the elementary, middle, and high schools that your patients attend. Build a list of teachers and school staff you have a connection with, and include parents of existing patients who work within the school system. Divide your staff up into teams with the mission of learning as much as possible about each school on your list. A perfect place to start is with schools your staff’s children attend, since this is an automatic in.

Note the name of the principal, school counselors, school nurse, and the attendance-office staff. There are multiple



purposes for visiting an individual school, all with the intention of creating name recognition and giving back. Some doctors donate \$50 to the sports or art program of a school when each student from that school gets braces. You can offer to provide dental health screenings during Dental Health Month. Look for opportunities to get your braces on the teachers in every school in town.

Most private schools have fund-raising auctions. Parents and alumni often donate by purchasing school auction items. You can select several schools to which you will donate a teenage full-treatment case or certificates for \$1,000 off of braces. You can donate art supplies to the elementary school art program and specifically request paintings be sent to your office to display on your windows and walls so non-patient parents must come to your office to view their children's artwork.

You should participate in all school fund-raisers your patients ask you to be involved in, specifically asking for name recognition for your contributions. Support the sports program by buying a banner for the football or baseball field or the gymnasium wall for basketball and volleyball games. Show up at swim meets or wrestling matches wearing your office logo jacket and mingle with parents and teachers. Create a schedule of the big games so you and/or your staff can show up for the big game and cheer. You can host a pizza party at the end of the season for softball, volleyball, or soccer teams (both school teams and community leagues) and give water bottles, ChapStick®, baseball hats, and sunscreen with your logo on them to teams you sponsor.

Arrange for your clinical staff to lecture at middle school and high school health classes, and take items with your practice's logo on them as gifts. Have your staff give dental hygiene talks to second- and third-graders and/or mini lectures about the sugar content in specific foods during Dental Health Month. (Again, you can begin with your staff's children's classes.) Solicit schools to allow you and your staff to put on a career development day or talk about a day in the life of an orthodontist, then send each student home with a certificate of attendance for completing your course as well as a toothbrush and ChapStick® with your name and logo on them.

Deliver thank-you baskets to school attendance offices for allowing children to miss part of school, and thank the attendance staff for all the extra work they do checking kids in and out of school. Learn the policies of each school with respect to attendance rules to help your scheduling staff create even flow in your patient schedule. Deliver an emergency orthodontic kit to each school nurse containing wax, an end cutter, elastics, etc. Write an article for the school paper about orthodontic trivia. Sponsor ads in the school yearbooks and sports programs so you continue that "popular office" theme.

You can promote college scholarships throughout middle school and high school with an essay contest open for entry to anyone who has been a patient of record at some point in your office. You can introduce this at evening PTA meetings or through the counseling office, then publicize it on your practice's Web site, in your newsletter, and on Facebook.

For younger kids, field trips to orthodontic offices are a big hit with first-grade, second-grade, and even kindergarten

classes. Staff involvement is essential, and this is a wonderful way to get participation from volunteer classroom moms as well. Not only do you reach into the elementary grades with these field trips, but your name goes home with these kids to help you gain popularity with older siblings and parents.

Community Projects

Have your staff volunteer to help with a community project and create an article to post on your Facebook or publish in your newsletter or the local newspaper. You can also send a press release about your service to your patients and community connections. These projects can be walk-a-thons, a race for the cure, highway clean-up, tree planting in the park, canned food drives, winter coat collections for the needy, visitations to local nursing homes, serving food to the homeless at the holidays ... and the ideas go on and on.

Look for ways to get publicity from your good deeds. Help a family in need from your church by providing one child's treatment free of charge. Make donations to the local YWCA, Girls & Boys Club, or Habitat for Humanity. Give a talk at a Boy Scouts of America or Girl Scouts of America meeting, and post an article with photos on your Web site and Facebook. Determine the activities that are popular with your patients, and associate your name with theirs.

Other events you can participate in include bridal shows, where you can have a booth and discuss braces or aligners prior to weddings so the bride can have a model's smile on her big day.

Nominate a staff person to attend Chamber of Commerce mixers to make sure your name is recognized by all in attendance, and ask for their referrals when someone calls in need of a local orthodontist.

Write an article for the Chamber of Commerce about your years in service and contributions to the community. Look for local civic shows you can sponsor (talent shows, musical events, parades, concerts in the park, etc).

Health Fairs can expose you to people of all ages within the community. Orthodontics has come a long way over the last 30 years, and the general population is still in the dark about the variety of orthodontic treatment methods that are available. Increasing public awareness about the ease of braces as well as showing "before and after" results can be astonishing.

With the media coverage of "extreme makeover" shows, more and more adults are interested in what options are available to them to enhance their smile. Create a PowerPoint with patient testimonials that focuses on the fun to be had over the course of treatment. Have information about every large employer in your area that has great orthodontic insurance benefits. Many people don't know they have adult coverage for orthodontics, and their benefit goes unused.

Newspaper Articles

Parents and patients still read the daily newspaper. Establish yourself as the "orthodontic expert" and write a column titled "Ask The Expert" for the local paper. Articles can be short and informative on the never-ending subject of orthodontic awareness, lifetime retainer wear, if wisdom teeth are

necessary today, or when a child should have the first orthodontic exam. Write the article as if the newspaper reporter is interviewing you, and make sure to include a small photo of yourself.

Local Salon Partners

Make a list of all the salons your staff have connections with for hair, nails, tanning, and massage. Also make a list of the local medical spas in your area. Have the staff ask their stylists if they will display your office marketing brochure in their lobbies. You can also leave business cards with the reception staff to be passed out when someone inquires. Most people who visit a medical spa are focused on cosmetics, especially facial cosmetics and enhancing their appearance. Be sure to get the message out that no professional referral is required for an orthodontic examination, and that one is never too old to have a gorgeous smile.

The goal of community marketing is to create opportunities for people to talk about the results that your practice delivers. Take your staff to lunch once a month, in uniform, so the community sees you and your team together in public. Make sure your waiter or waitress knows who you are and what you do. Pay attention and notice their teeth. Do not be bashful about telling your waiter or waitress that 25% or more of your patients are adults, and if they or any of their friends might be considering orthodontic treatment, you would be honored to have them come see you. Make it known when

you are celebrating birthdays or office anniversaries and achievements so that others can celebrate with you and you make a memorable impact.

Since orthodontic treatment is viewed as both elective and expensive, research shows that most people need to hear the name of an orthodontist multiple times before they make a call on their own to come in for an exam. When you have patients singing your praises, dental offices recommending you, and a strong practice image within the community, you will be the first choice a person interested in orthodontics will make. Most new patients are looking for a quality experience and a long-term relationship much more than they are looking for a cheap price. They assume your clinical talent is exceptional, but they make their buying decision based on your popularity, your reputation, and how they feel in your office. Work hard to create solid name recognition within your community through everything you do inside and outside of the practice—because image and popularity count. **OP**

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