

A Best Practices Point of View from



Through the Looking Glass: What Your Patients See

What do *Your* Patients see?

The competitive landscape for dentistry services intensifies with each passing month. Every urban strip mall, every suburban destination mall, every other new downtown condo seems to house a dental practice.

How is a consumer to choose?

New business generation – the lifeblood of any business – is a challenge in every sector. Marketing and advertising channels have multiplied and created fragmented audiences. Reaching and appealing to potential new patients takes ingenuity. It also requires attention to the fundamental principles of attracting and retaining new patients.

In this Point-of-View Paper, we focus as much on the techniques as on the basics of maintaining communication and building relationships.

Our common goal is to ensure that your practice is strategically and accurately reflected.

What's Your Value Proposition?

Every organization has one: a Value Proposition. It's what differentiates you from your competition and positions you in the market to attract and retain your ideal customers.

Funny thing is... many people are unable to define or even describe their own Value Proposition, or Unique Sales Proposition. The most common answer to this question is people. As in "Our People Make the Difference". In fact, many an award-winning slogan is based on just that. But while it may be true, it's not enough. Everybody has people. We need to dig deeper.

The second level of thought usually revolves around the concepts of "going the extra mile" and "going above and beyond".

While that is a bit more concrete, it's still not specific enough. Until you understand what is expected and what is considered the basic standard, how can you define what constitutes "extra"?

When seemingly similar products or services on the market don't achieve equal results, it is probable that the more successful business has done a better job of identifying and articulating its Value Proposition.

In the dental context, if a prospective patient views your services as equal to another practitioner's, or an existing patient sees your proposed treatment plan as interchangeable with another, the decision to go ahead is likely to be made on the basis of location and price. Your true strengths must be effectively communicated to patients for meaningful marketing and improved case acceptance.

How do you show your patients that you value their business? Does your team know, or might they benefit from a lunch-and-learn discussion on this topic?

Defining Service Standards:	
1	What are patients' basic expectations?
2	Do we meet those expectations? Do we exceed them?
3	What processes do we have in place to strive to exceed customer expectations?
4	Do we follow guidelines to ensure an appropriate balance of empowerment and consistency?
5	What makes our practice stand out from the competition?
6	What little things can we do to make us memorable?
7	How do we want our patients to feel about their experience with us?
8	How do we hope patients will describe our practice to others?

It is often the small things – the feel-good moments – that get remembered and repeated the most.

What are your Wow! factors that keep you top of mind, and get your patients talking to their friends?

Patient Retention What's it Worth to You?

In any industry, repeat business is a fundamental game-changer. Loyalty has a price tag. In a dental practice it looks something like this:

A patient comes in to your office for a first appointment, complaining of a toothache. Let's say it costs \$200 to treat. You fix the immediate problem – thank you very much – and the patient is on her way. She's in a hurry so will call you to book a next visit... if she remembers.

Or, you could schedule a follow-up exam, after which she receives a comprehensive treatment plan with options and an explanation of the benefits of ongoing care. She then makes an appointment for her husband who has also slipped into an irregular pattern of treatment, then appointments for her 2 children. They all follow a 6-month recall cycle for 5 years, with a filling or two along the way and discretionary services such as teeth whitening or sports guards for the kids.

Your practice has gone from one-time revenue of a few hundred dollars to around \$10,000, and that's before any crowns, bridges, orthodontics, implants or other high-value treatments that the family might need.

Think of it another way – how much does it cost your practice to retain a patient? For most, the cost to get them into your waiting room is the time it takes to make a phone call – or better, an automated email or text message. Even better if a patient books before they leave or calls you for their regular cleanings.

Now consider marketing initiatives for new patients: there is a lot of strategy-planning-execution time and expense to take into account. The ROI can make it a no-brainer, when done well, but it's still an expense.

A team focus on patient retention is simply smart business. And basic math: The more loyal a patient is to your practice, the more valuable they become to your business. So what's the secret?

If we had to distill it down to one thing, clinical expertise aside, we'd be wise to recall the words of the late Maya Angelou:

"People may not remember exactly what you said; they may forget what you did. But they will always remember how you made them feel."

How does your practice measure up?

- ✓ Do your patients feel welcome, respected?
- ✓ Are they attended to promptly, and in a friendly way?
- ✓ Are parents with babies and toddlers given TLC – and maybe kid-friendly distractions?
- ✓ Is your environment calm?
- ✓ Does the team exude confidence and control?
- ✓ Are they discreet with patient information and discussions?
- ✓ Is the team courteous when answering questions or dealing with anxiety?
- ✓ Do you check in with your patients after extensive work or complex treatment to confirm success and satisfaction?
- ✓ Do you communicate with your patients off-cycle through your patient portal, emails and/or social media?
- ✓ Do you acknowledge their birthdays and life milestones?

On the surface, these things may seem obvious. But the busier we get, the more likely we are to bypass the small niceties. With time, patients will forget the needles and the drilling, but we will remember the little things like being recognized, perceiving VIP treatment and personal attention and being treated like a valued customer.

Where Do (new) Patients Come From?

You may be operating a successful dental practice with loyal clients, great retention, satisfactory productivity and steady profitability. What a great achievement... kudos to you.

For all the other practices out there, increased growth through new patient acquisition is vital to the success and sustainability of their business. When TV spots, print ads and online campaigns like Google AdWords or website banners fall outside the limits of a modest advertising budget, how does a small-to-medium-sized practice effectively attract attention and draw new business?

Here are a few ideas:

Tap your existing patient database for referrals

There's a great deal of trust that accompanies a personal recommendation. In many companies, referrals can account for one-third of all new business.

Every patient has immediate family members and friends, all consumers of dental services. But growing your business is not a top-of-mind priority for them. They require a nudge.

Happy clients refer new clients. So a) keep your patients happy; b) be assertive in asking for referrals; c) remind them frequently; and d) show your appreciation to encourage participation.

Optimize your website

Is your website helping you generate new leads? Visitors need to immediately understand how your practice presents unique benefits to them. Clear, frequent calls to action will inspire contact, and Search Engine Optimization techniques are key to helping your business rank as high as possible in search results.

Think grassroots. Think local.

Your best pocket of potential is likely your own backyard. Direct Response initiatives and signage within your immediate neighbourhood can reinforce the convenience of your location to long-term residents and present a solution to newly arrived neighbours. You can create interest with special offers, postcards, door hangers, posters, fridge magnets, dental product samples...

These items can also attract attention when you get involved in events like school fairs and church functions or local mall and community centre gatherings. Sponsoring such events and local

sports teams goes a long way in growing your word-of-mouth recognition. Or create your own event for locals to drop in, meet and greet, qualify for a complimentary service or special incentive.

Don't overlook social media

Marketing is all about getting your compelling message to your target audience. Understanding who your audience is and how you are most likely to reach them is a winning strategy.

Frequency and repetition build top-of-mind awareness. If your target audience is using social media to communicate, you should be part of that conversation. It is easy to discount social media as specific to a young demographic; don't. The 55+ set is now one of the highest-volume user groups on Facebook.

Look inside your "Million-dollar filing cabinet"

You may not think of your unscheduled recommended treatment as a marketing vehicle. But procrastinators can turn into lapsed customers and eventually qualify again as new business. If your recommendations are growing mold in a filing cabinet, despite the best of intentions, they represent lost revenue. Follow-up calls and digital pokes can help you realize organic growth.

Fine-tune your reception process

In person or over the telephone, a friendly, knowledgeable reception can have a dramatic impact on new client intake. Read on for tips to develop an appropriate focus and process for your reception.

Impress When it Matters

So how *are* new callers to your practice treated? Do they receive a warm, welcoming greeting and patient, empathetic service... or are they put on hold and made to feel as though they're interrupting someone's too-busy day?

Because we rarely get a second chance to make a first impression, front line staff must be equipped, trained and coached to be a one-person welcoming committee. Consider these techniques:

Put a Smile in Your Voice

This may sound like a motherhood statement, but a caller can tell when you are smiling. Good advice does not go out of style.

Perfect the Art of Listening

Listening carefully to your callers' introductory words will guide the conversation and help you set a positive tone from the outset.

Be Prepared with a Front Line FAQ

Good service providers are definitely friendly. As important, though, is knowledge and the ability to accurately answer Frequently Asked Questions. A caller's first question is usually the deal breaker: How soon can you see me? Are you good with children? Can you direct-bill my insurance company? What's the earliest/latest appointment available?

Beyond the first questions, staff should be able to: recognize common symptoms; ask relevant questions to fully understand the patient's issue; confidently explain basic procedures; describe your services; and discuss insurance details.

Aim to Book an Appointment On the Spot

The goal should be to get an appointment scheduled. Offering an appointment date that falls within 5 days increases the chance of getting the caller to join your practice.

Then, make the data collection process foolproof by creating and using a checklist (built into leading software like ABELDent): name, address and phone number; email address including permission to use it; reason for call/services of interest; preferred appointment times.

It is good practice to have a back-up available if reception is busy with patients. Always ask permission to put someone on hold and

then check back quickly. If the caller cannot be immediately served, promise to call back as soon as possible. Sitting on hold or waiting through transfers can feel like forever to a caller and lead to a hang-up.

Some people may advise that you ask the prospective patient how they found you. That is definitely good information to have, as it helps you measure and refine your marketing efforts. But do remember that this detail is for *your* benefit, not theirs. Respect that the caller's time may be limited; you can always probe later.

When an appointment is scheduled, close the call by telling the caller that "the team is looking forward to meeting you".

Keep Track of your Callers

If the caller is not ready to schedule right away, by offering an appointment you have opened the door to ask for their contact information and permission to stay in touch.

Maintain a database of these individuals. Converting them into patients may require a few calls or emails, maybe even a heads-up when you are offering any specials to your patient base. We all need reminders.

The key is to drive home the importance of genuinely welcoming callers, showing interest, offering an immediate appointment and building relationships.

If You Build it, Will They Call?

The current thinking on website design seems unanimous: A business website should be designed for prospective customers.

And it's not all about you – even though the “About Us” tab on the majority of sites appears FIRST on most navigation bars! It's about what *you* can do for *them*.

It's not even primarily for your existing customers. Your current patients should ideally get exclusive access to a customized extranet or personalized communication through a portal. “Already a patient? Click here.”

Your website exists as an information destination for new leads and a powerful mechanism to convert these leads into patients. It's digital real estate to present your Value Proposition. Its raison d'être is to get your phone to ring, email to ping or online chat to buzz. So prominent and compelling calls to action are vital. If that alone is missing from your website, you're ready for a refresh.

Here's a list of tips that should prove helpful, whether you and your website designer are tackling your first website or an upgrade to an existing one.

1. Make sure a compelling call to action appears on every page.
2. Craft a powerful expression of your practice's Value Proposition and Positioning Statement. You want visitors to clearly understand what makes you stand out from your competition.
3. Offer a clear, accurate description of your services.
4. Plan a layout that follows current conventions. Visitors don't want to work too hard to get the information they need.
 - a. Place your logo where they expect to see it: in the upper left corner
 - b. Put your contact info in a prominent spot
 - c. Structure your site with a top or side navigation bar with intuitive menus and titles
 - d. Offer your key info above the fold – don't make them scroll
 - e. Use colours that reflect your practice personality

5. Keep your copy short, and focus on the benefits to the reader.
 - a. Use concise, plain language to express your unique strengths and grab your reader's attention
 - b. Make a list of keywords – the terms that resonate with your desired audience – and use them frequently
 - c. Express all your features as benefits. This is a practised skill – it may take some time, thought and brainstorming
 - d. Create “read more” links so your reader can choose when to scan and when to delve
 - e. BUT avoid the tendency to bury good info under too many clicks!
6. Include testimonials. True sentiments from real patients help build trust, especially when they're in synch with your Value Proposition. Make sure the stories focus on the patient experience and service, avoiding clinical commentary.
7. Vary the way you deliver your information. Some people like words, others like facts and figures. Infographics and pie charts are great for this. Most of us like photos to help visualize ourselves as a patient in your practice.
8. When you get to the “About Us” section, strive for a personal touch. Using “I” and “We” is one simple way to create warmth in your copy. Photos of the practitioners, teams and practice environment add depth.
9. Search Engine Optimization is vital. Use your keywords in your copy and in your page titles. Again, brainstorming can help you and your team figure out what words and strings of words your ideal prospective patients are likely to enter into a mainstream search engine like Google or Bing or into a specialized dental directory.
10. Make sure your site is mobile friendly. A responsive design will adjust the view to best usability on a smartphone, tablet or computer screen. It's easy to check this: just click <https://www.google.ca/webmasters/tools/mobile-friendly/> and enter your URL.

This list just scratches the surface of a very interesting topic. The next level involves setting up benchmarks and analytics to assess your site's effectiveness. Don't hesitate to make improvements based on results... that's the beauty of digital!

Firing on All Cylinders

Advertising, marketing and self-promotion are complex fields. But ongoing attraction of new patients is critical to the growth and success of any practice.

At a fundamental level, identifying and understanding how to reach your target audience is a critical first step in promoting your business. Articulating your compelling message and market position is vital in attracting first-time traffic. But engagement and loyalty are achieved through effective communication and trusted relationship building. It's patient retention founded on clinical excellence that will propel a profitable, sustainable business.

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Easy to use and fully integrated, ABELDent offers efficient product implementation with customized training, patient/practitioner portals, unparalleled customer service and around-the-clock support to thousands of Dentists across North America.

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