



REPRODUCE

Increasing busyness in good times and bad

For more on this topic, go to www.dentaleconomics.com and search using the following key words: *busyness, internal marketing, external marketing, Web site, Dianne Glasscoe-Watterson.*

Dear Dianne,

I have been in practice for 18 years in the same location. Until two years ago, it was typical for me to be scheduled out about four weeks. Now, I'm only scheduled out about five days. I have a good base of patients, but I feel uneasy not being booked out further. I used to have two full-time hygienists, but now I have only one hygienist due to our lag in business. What should I be doing to bolster my patient base and attract new patients?

Dr. M

Dear Dr. M,

I recently asked one of my audiences for a show of hands in answering this question: "How many of you are as busy as you would like to be?" In a group of about 70 people, only two hands went up. One was a prison dentist, and the other a provider in a Medicaid clinic.

There are many reasons why dental practices go through downturns, such as increasing competition from too many providers in the area, managed-care inroads, scandal, and practice obsolescence. However, most of the current busyness problems are a product of the current economic lethargy. I think it is safe to say that most of us are feeling the pinch in one way or another. Demand for dentistry is down as people struggle to rebalance their checkbooks and lives.

However, it is nonproductive to use the sluggish economy as an excuse for poor business practices. Like many of your colleagues, you have been blessed with a steady demand for your services without much effort beyond hanging your shingle and being open for business. That was the past. The reality today is that you should not wait for business downturns to consider marketing. Rather, marketing your business should be part of a solid business plan ... even part of your daily routine.

You and your team can engage in internal marketing every day by 1) taking excellent care of your patients, 2) asking for referrals, and 3) tangibly rewarding people who send their friends and family to you. The strongest referrals you have are from your patient base. I believe behavior that is rewarded is repeated, so be sure to thank them with a tangible reward of some sort, such as dinner tickets,

car wash vouchers, movie tickets, etc. (as your state law allows).

Now is a good time to make sure you and everyone you employ treat patients like welcome guests. Ask yourself some questions. Is your reception room in need of an update? Do your patients feel a sense of warmth and comfort when they enter your front door? Your office décor and patient restroom make a statement about the level of pride you take in your work and your concern for patient comfort.

External marketing efforts encompass anything that gets your name in front of the buying public. Do you have a Web site? As a consumer, I would not go to a dentist who does not have a Web site. Survey results show that people who use the Internet to search for professional services are better educated, more affluent, and more likely to spend money with you than clientele who use the Yellow Pages. My experience is that while Yellow Page ads might produce some new patients, the cost of running the ad may be higher than the amount of revenue generated from these patients. The only way to know is to track new patients and the production they generate. My experience is that the dollars spent on Yellow Pages gives a poor return on investment.

A Web site needs to be well-positioned to give you good exposure. One of the most important things to remember about Web sites is that the focus should be on making a strong value statement. The value statement sets forth why the individual should choose you over your competitors. Professional marketing people understand this concept very well. What is *your* competitive advantage?

You should allocate 1% to 2% of your practice's gross receipts to marketing. Hire professionals to help you produce a Web site to give you the best Web presence in your area and increase your value statement. The Web site should be all about the benefits of coming to your practice.

Use these down times wisely to ramp up your marketing efforts and improve your practice ... and don't stop your marketing efforts when things get busier! **DE**

Dianne Glasscoe-Watterson assists dental practices in achieving their highest potential through practical, effective onsite consulting. Her continuing-education courses help dental professionals refresh their knowledge base and reignite professional passion. Visit Dianne's Web site at www.professionaldentalmgmt.com or e-mail her at dglasscoe@northstate.net.