

Should You Ring in the New Year by Hiring a Marketing Consultant?

BY MICHAEL VENTRIELLO

HEED THE WORDS OF DIRTY HARRY

Like most independent business owners, the average dentist typically assumes the responsibility for his or her own marketing. But is this a good thing? The answer can often be summed up with a paraphrase of Clint Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" character –

“A DENTIST’S GOT TO KNOW HIS OR HER LIMITATIONS.”

The two biggest limitations facing the do-it-yourself dental practice marketer are: expertise and time. When it comes to marketing, most dentists have very little of either. Another factor is the failure of many dentists to recognize that even though marketing is not clinical in nature, it is indeed a specialized field that requires a balance of analysis and creativity to derive optimal “practice” outcomes.

Consider this. When most dentists decide it is time to go into private practice, they already have an accountant and attorney lined up. They tend, however, to overlook the fact that it's equally important to have a qualified marketing professional – especially one with a strong public relations background, to round out their business advisory team.

In my opinion, using the services of a trusted and qualified attorney, accountant and marketing professional is the key to a successful practice. If all goes well, the attorney will keep you out of court, the accountant will keep you in the black, and the marketing consultant will elevate your public profile to help generate business, thus complimenting the efforts of the other two advisers.

General dentistry is becoming more complex every day, with

the advent of sophisticated diagnostic and treatment technologies, advanced cosmetic procedures, new oral systemic research, and the economy-driven trend to include services once the exclusive domain of specialists such as endodontists, periodontists, and orthodontists.

Keep in mind that marketing has been on its own parallel path of increased complexity - with social media the new shiny object that can easily waste a dentist's time and money if not done properly. So how can a dentist keep up with the latest developments in dentistry and also effectively grow the practice in an economy where there is less discretionary income, increased competition from large group practices and less margin for marketing errors than ever before? **Seriously consider hiring a marketing consultant.**

LEARN FROM A CHIROPRACTOR’S MISTAKE

About 20 years ago, I was the managing partner for a small advertising and PR agency that had a young ambitious chiropractor as a client. He wanted a custom marketing campaign to set him apart in his community rather than use a cookie cutter “Zip code exclusive” ad template program provided by the practice-building consultants he had been speaking to.

After conducting a good deal of market research, we developed a multi-faceted program that included logo design, tag line, newspaper and radio ads, in-office promotions, statement-stuffers, a monthly newsletter and local public relations. We also recommended the placement of smaller, redesigned Yellow Page ads in fewer directories because he was overspending in this area.

The campaign we developed was working great! He was getting new patients, seeing his current patients more consistently, and was also able to secure a contract as the official chiropractor for his

town's police force.

One day we received a panicked phone call from our client saying he had to cut back on his ad budget immediately. It seemed the Yellow Page rep, unhappy with our recommendation to cut back on phone directory spending, went directly to the doctor and convinced him to spend even more on Yellow Page advertising!

We reminded him that it was now our job to protect his best interests, support his strategic objectives and be the "bad cop" when necessary. From that point on, every rep and vendor was instructed to call our office to make an appointment.

This anecdote is especially important for the dentist opening a new practice. For as soon as the sign goes up, there will be a parade of media sales reps and vendors of all types, looking to grab the biggest piece of the marketing budget before the next guy comes knocking.

Nothing can derail a sound marketing plan faster than a tactic coming from left field. If it doesn't fit the strategy or the budget, a good marketing consultant will take a rain check on your behalf.

So where should you spend your money, and what percentage of your budget should be allocated to specific media and tactics? Who can negotiate the best rates and terms? That's the job of an experienced marketing consultant.

WHAT DOES A MARKETING CONSULTANT LOOK LIKE?

Think of a marketing consultant as a combination architect and general contractor for all things related to marketing your practice: advertising, public relations, direct marketing, social media, and even patient relations.

Your marketing consultant should be very well-rounded and have a diverse skill set, as he will be the person responsible for developing the marketing strategy for your practice, selecting the mix of tactics used, managing your budget, supervising outside vendors, and last but certainly not least, documenting and evaluating the results.

I believe working with a local consultant or agency is best, because nothing beats regular face-to-face meetings and brainstorming sessions with you and your staff. What's more, a consultant who is familiar with, and has close working relationships with local media and service providers such as photographers, printers, etc. will generally be much more efficient and cost-effective.

Either a qualified solo agent or a small agency can serve this architect/general contractor role. Your town probably has a wealth of qualified marketing professional options:

- Work-at-home moms who once held full-time corporate or agency marketing positions
- Recently retired marketing executives who still want to keep active on a part-time basis
- Down-sized marketing professionals who have decided to forge ahead on their own
- Small advertising agencies looking to expand their local client base
- Community college marketing instructors who want to keep a hand in real world marketing

WHAT SKILLS SHOULD YOUR MARKETING CONSULTANT HAVE?

Before you hastily post an ad on Craig's List, you should think carefully about the experience and job requirements of your marketing consultant. Knowledge of dentistry is a plus, but not mandatory – that's where you will consult the consultant to help school him about your profession and your business. If they have been successful in building the practice of another local professional such as an attorney, optometrist, accountant, veterinarian, etc., they should be put on the short list of contenders.

With regards to marketing skill set, the most important consideration is having experience across multiple marketing disciplines and a proven track-record in developing strategic and integrated marketing programs.

As a writer and a disciple of David Ogilvy, I believe strong writing and editing skills may be the most important hands-on competency your marketing consultant can have. You've heard the phrase "content is king." That was true in David Ogilvy's Golden Age of Advertising and is true now more than ever thanks to the Internet and social media.

The ability to write, and to edit/evaluate the writing of others, will enable your consultant to cover a lot of ground and go a long way in creating a strong message and compelling content for your practice. That said, the more competencies on this list that your marketing candidate has, the better – and the more bang you will get for your buck:

- Branding & positioning
- Marketing communications
- Public Relations with strong media contacts
- Direct Marketing (postal and e-mail) with experience in list procurement
- Advertising with media buying experience
- Social Media
- Database Management
- ROI Analysis
- Creative Team and Vendor Management
- Negotiation Skills

INTERVIEWING & HIRING A MARKETING CONSULTANT

So, you've put an ad on Craig's List, LinkedIn or other online classified directory. You've instructed all applicants to include along with their resume, a cover letter explaining why they are the "whole enchilada" when it comes to marketing and perhaps a brief case study on how they developed and deployed a campaign to help a local professional build their practice.

As the applicants respond, you and perhaps a trusted team member will review their resumes, cover letters, web sites, blogs and social media pages. Candidates should include these links in their correspondence with you. Narrow down your choices to 6-12 candidates and have your Office Manager schedule one-hour appointments at a time when there are no patients in the office. You'll want these to be before or after regular hours, or when the office is closed; you'll want to give the interview process your full attention and the highest priority it deserves.

ASK THESE QUESTIONS AND TAKE NOTES:

- 1) Tell me about your background.
- 2) Why do you think you can help improve the business of my dental practice?
- 3) Give me an example of how you helped another business.
- 4) With 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest level of expertise, rate yourself in these following areas:
 - Market Research
 - Marketing Strategy and Planning
 - Public Relations
 - Marketing Communications
 - Database Building and Management
 - Advertising & Media Buying
 - Graphic Design
 - Internet and Interactive Marketing
 - Social Media
 - Direct Marketing
 - Event Planning
 - Writing & Content Development
 - Rate & Price Negotiation
 - Outside Vendor Management

Wrap it up with one last question: “Of the skills listed above, which ones would you be most likely to outsource?”

GETTING STARTED

Before you hire a marketing consultant, you need to set a realistic monthly budget that you can commit to for at least six months. Your consultant needs to work within this budget in order to accurately estimate his or her fees along with any outside costs for printing, web development, advertising media, etc.

Get on the same ledger page in regard to the budget as soon as possible, as there are few things more frustrating and counterproductive than signing a contract and then being told the budgetary number you shared covers consulting fees and nothing else. What you will end up with is a nice marketing plan that you can keep on file.

The foundation of all sound marketing strategy and tactical plans is research and you want to build upon a strong foundation when you market your practice. Here are some things that you and your marketing consultant need to examine.

MARKETING AUDIT:

Empower your consultant to provide an honest assessment of all your marketing activities to date. This will enable you to allocate more funds to what is working, needing improvement. You can eliminate strategies that are not functioning well and introduce new tactics that may be appropriate.

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS:

What is the demographic profile of the community you serve. Do

the numbers skew younger or older than the national average? What types of professionals are prominent is the bulk of your advertising going to be focused on fluoride varnish and braces, whitening and clear aligners or periodontal therapy and permanent dentures?

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS:

Is another dentist or specialist in the area siphoning off your business? Where and what are they advertising? Is their creative execution superior to yours? Are their offices newer and more high-tech? Do they do a better job answering the phone? Have you ever called their office posing as a potential new patient?

MARKETING RESOURCE AUDIT:

Many dental equipment manufacturers provide marketing kits that can be easily customized by the dental office. These kits often include ad slicks, brochures, web banners, videos, posters and press release templates. Are you using them to their full potential? Some manufacturers may have co-op programs where they reimburse a portion of your advertising costs if you use their pre-approved ads. Are you taking full advantage of these budget-stretching programs if they are available to you?

BRAND MESSAGE/POSITIONING STATEMENT:

In the words of *The Who*, “Who are you?”

Are you a family practice, cosmetic dentist, painless dentist, smile-saver, holistic oral health practice, or what? Three things will determine your positioning statement: Your expertise, local competition for a particular service offering, and the demographic profile of your area.

PRIORITIZING:

It is unlikely that you will be able to do everything that needs to be done. A marketing consultant can help you develop a “first things first” phased approach plan that you can build upon over time. However, you may want to start by taking a long hard look at your website, as it is the central hub of marketing activity.

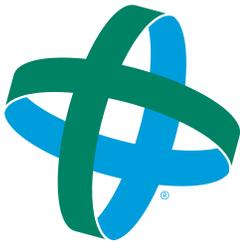
ROI ANALYSIS:

Every marketing activity needs to be designed so that results can be tracked and analyzed. Depending on the medium, this can include measuring inbound phone calls, website traffic, social media engagement, coupon redemption, editorial placements, etc. At the end of the day, how many new patients can be traced to each tactic or campaign? You and your marketing consultant need to determine and agree upon what the realistic benchmarks for success will be.

By the time you read this article, it will be the end of 2012 - A perfect time to evaluate the past year’s marketing efforts and develop and deploy your new 2013 marketing strategy with the assistance of a qualified marketing professional. Good luck!



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