

## HOW TO ATTRACT PATIENTS IN AN UNCERTAIN ECONOMY.

The first thing to understand about attracting patients in a bad economy, is that the principles that drive the purchase decision don't change in a bad economy vs. a good economy. It is the mindset and purchasing power of the potential patient that changes. Therefore there are three critical components to understand in attracting new business. 1) The principles that drive the purchase decision, 2) the mindset of patients in uncertain times, and 3) the factors influencing the mindset and purchasing power of potential patients in relation to your business.

### 1. THE PRINCIPLES THAT DRIVE MARKETING.

A principle is a fundamental truth, and just like everything else in life, there are principles that drive purchase decisions. These principles are in effect whether we know it or not, and the better we understand what is fundamentally driving patients to purchase your services, the more successful you will be. Imagine trying to build an airplane, the better you understand the principle of aerodynamics, the more likely you are to be successful. The more you fight against them, the less likely you are to succeed. So what are the principles that drive marketing?

1. Needs and wants are based on perception.
2. Initial purchases are made on the perceived value of the purchase in relation to a perceived need or want.
3. Forming a perception requires knowledge.
4. Knowledge must be given incrementally.
5. Knowledge of differences creates a reason to choose.
6. Trust is earned or lost through increased knowledge.
7. Purchase requires trust.
8. Rewarded trust leads to subsequent purchases, unrequited trust leads to lost opportunity.
9. Continually rewarded trust engenders loyalty.
10. Loyalty is necessary for the long term success of the business.

It would be wise to understand each of these principles thoroughly and how they relate to the message you convey in your marketing, and more importantly how they should be the foundation of a proper brand definition that will drive all of your marketing decisions moving forward.

### 2. THE MINDSET OF PATIENTS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES.

The line between a need and a want in our lives moves depending on circumstances and our mindset at any given time. The need for continual care from a dentist can turn to a want or even an unnecessary luxury if we feel we have no way to pay for it. When times are tight our priorities change. People tighten their pocketbooks and in most industries (including dentistry) tend to only make purchases for higher priority items or items classified as a necessity. In good times most dental procedures and orthodontics will be viewed as necessary. In tough times, it is sometimes not until the pain is unbearable that a dental procedure is classified as a necessity. So how does a dentist combat this perception of unnecessary dental care?

- A. Convince your current patients that without continuing care and regular dental services, it will cost more in the long run. This goes back to the first principle we listed, "Needs and wants are based on perception." Marketing, by definition, is an attempt to control the perception of customers. The truth is, continuing care and regular dental visits cost less than the alternative in the long run. If this is understood, it will help your patients keep dental care classified as a need. Find ways such as a patient newsletter, education on your website or most importantly, talking to them while they are in the office. Train your staff on what to say and don't lose the opportunity to talk to them while they are in the chair.

B. Find the patients who still have money to spend. Continue or expand your marketing efforts. When money is tight we naturally cut expenses, and the tendency for most businesses, including dentistry, is to cut marketing. Many stop all together. The truth is there are still people out there with money to spend on dental procedures. If you don't find them, they won't find you. The key here is to be smart in your messaging, and consistent in your efforts.

1. Your message needs to clearly differentiate your practice to make you stand out from the others. Give people a reason to choose you. Think of the principle "knowledge of differences creates a reason to choose."
2. Be consistent. By continually getting your name in front of potential patients, and providing opportunity to find you, when the need arises to call a dentist, you will be top of mind. This is especially powerful as your competition is most likely reducing their marketing efforts.

If you are not marketing, then what factors are controlling the perception of potential customers? It is up to you to create the perceptions you desire to win business. Create the need not only for what services you offer, but for your particular practice as well.

### 3. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE MINDSET AND PURCHASING POWER OF POTENTIAL PATIENTS.

Reduced or lost income, stress over an uncertain future, and loss of dental insurance are all factors influencing patients in uncertain times. Depending on your particular growth needs, you should deal with these factors differently.

For example, to compensate for reduced or lost income, find ways to add value to your services, free exams, teeth whitening, or other incentives to communicate that you understand that times may be tough and you want to do more for your patients. Stress over an uncertain future can be combatted by educating your current and potential patients about the affordability of continuing care or preventative procedures as explained previously. As an economy worsens, the amount of people who pay with insurance lessens. It is important to recognize the difference in mindset that this generates. If my insurance is paying, I am more likely to have procedures I want but don't deem necessary, once it is gone, that is less likely. Offering different payment options or payment plans are some ways to combat this.

Ultimately, speaking to patients in a manner that addresses their needs, wants, and fears, is what is necessary to build trust. Remember principle 7: "purchase requires trust." In uncertain times, trust is more difficult to come by, so you may need to work harder at it. This also means that you need to be honest. All of your marketing efforts need to speak truth. If someone trusts you but doesn't feel that their trust is rewarded by the experience they have after purchase, they likely won't come back. Your best hope for continued business and long term success is from patient loyalty.

This is an ideal time to contact inactive patients and remind them of the long term health and cost benefits from continual care. Inform them of any additional value you have integrated into your services as well. Remember, if someone has stopped visiting the dentist, or switched dentists, it is because the perceived value of your services is no longer equal to their perceived need or want (Principle 2). Using a tool such as the Correspondence Manager in eCentral would be an effective solution to actively solicit inactive patients and increase their perceived value.

In conclusion, make sure those helping you with your marketing truly understand the principles that drive marketing and strategic marketing in general. In the uncertain financial climate, you don't have the time, or the means to test new dental marketing ideas until you find one that is successful - you need to go with someone who has been down that road before.

With smart marketing through uncertain times you will set your practice up for short term as well as long term success. For help with your marketing efforts, or answers to any marketing questions you might have, we invite you to talk to one of our consultants.

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