

Increase in new patient flow and referrals



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If you ask a dentist what is the greatest challenge their practice faces today, you are likely to hear new patient flow. In face-to-face conversations we have asked more than 7,500 dentists that very question. The overwhelming response (2 to 1) was new patient flow. A healthy practice should be seeing an average 25 new patients per month per doctor and should strive to have these be fee-for-service patients. Yet many dentists are seeing just a fraction of that number and participation in PPOs are on the rise.

The thought of proactively marketing your practice often brings a negative connotation to mind. It was not that long ago that marketing was actually looked down on and the common thought was; I don't want to be "one of those guys." The reality is, whatever you're doing, or not doing as far as marketing is concerned, effects the message you are sending to your patients, team, and community.

External marketing, including billboards, radio, and large signage is generally what most people think of when they think about marketing. However, on-going internal marketing is almost always a better vehicle and far less expensive. For example, 75%-80% of new patients come from patient referrals. So an effective internal marketing program designed to increase patient referrals should be your focus. You should really narrow that focus to your "ideal" patient. What does your ideal patient look like? What type of dentistry do you want to do more of—cosmetics, implants?

What do you think of this definition of an ideal patient; they arrive on time, readily accept your treatment plan, pay their bills, and refer their family and friends? We want to start with our ideal patient because like people tend to surround themselves and spend time with like people. The busier we all get and the less time we have, the fewer friends we tend to spend time with and those we do see are usually closer friends. So chances are if you get a referral from an "A" patient, you are likely to wind up with a new patient very similar to your referring patient. Therefore, when possible, you should focus on marketing and referral efforts to that ideal patient.

The following are some internal marketing tips to help you get started:

Set new patient goals

a. As the saying goes "if you don't know where you are going any road will take you there." How many new patients did you average per month last year? How many new patients would you like be seeing per month by the end of this year? If you and your team answer these questions, then begin to track and measure the results, you will increase your chances of hitting new targets.

Run on Time: The number one thing a dental office can do to market their practice is run on time.

a. Everyone is busy these days from the CEO to the "Soccer Mom." People have become less tolerant of "their" time being disrespected. In addition, if your practice is running behind, the perception is you're too busy and not even interested in new patients. So many of your current patient base and your number one source of new patients could actually refer away from you. "My dentist is pretty busy but there is a new guy that just opened up down the street."

Have a Morning Huddle

A well run "Morning Huddle" is the single most important thing you can do to increase communication and productivity in your practice and will help your practice to stay focused and run on time. Fewer than 10% of dentists have a morning huddle. If you would like information on structuring a morning huddle please contact your Henry Schein Field Sales Consultant for help.

The Telephone: Answer the telephone before the 3rd ring

This is the first impression a new patient has of your practice. A pleasant, inviting voice that is willing to patiently take time to initiate a relationship with the new patient is critical to the new patient experience.

Stagger lunches and staffing on Friday's to make sure that your phone is answered by a "live" person.

On-hold message

If you do have to put a patient on hold, a professional, recorded message is one of the best ways to introduce new procedures, techniques, and technology to your patients. In a recent survey, 80% of people said they had purchased a product they learned about while on hold with a business.

Reception Room

Your Reception Room should be your marketing area. The area should be neat and well lit and updated every 5 years.

- What do you want your patients to know about you? Patient's testimonial letters with before and after photos provide a great visual for the client considering specialized treatments.
- What clinical services do you provide; implants, cosmetic dentistry, orthodontics?
- What technologies have you chosen to improve treatment options: Hard- and Soft- Tissue Lasers; Digital Technology, CAD/CAM?

Remove the competitors. Many doctors think they are in a competition with the dentist across the street when in reality you are competing for discretionary income. You presented veneers to

“Mrs. Jones” but she mentally just spent that money on a Carnival Cruise she saw in People Magazine in your reception room. Patient Education in your reception room is a must. Replace the TV and all of the “bad” news your patients listen to with dental procedures that are available in your practice, as well as medical health and wellness channels.

Henry Schein offers GURU. GURU offers:

- i. Video and interactive animations
- ii. GURU TV (waiting room DVD)
- iii. Full Integration with HSPS (Dentrix, G3, G4, and Easy Dental 2008 – Bridge Available for Other Systems – COMING SOON)
- iv. Flexible, customized
- v. Continued content development

Gifts: Don't let your patients leave empty-handed. Small gifts are a nice touch and show appreciation.

- Bath oils, lotions, golf balls and/or tees, pens, pen lights—all with your name and logo
- Lottery ticket with a note that says, “Thanks a million for coming in today”

Generating Referrals

As we said, 75%-80% of new patients should come from patient referrals, yet many dental practices do not focus on their #1 resource—their current patient base. Many patients do not know that you are looking for new patients (especially if you frequently run behind schedule). The following are tips for asking for referrals. You could “roleplay” these ideas during an upcoming team meeting.

At the initial visit – A new patient who has a favorable impression is more likely to share this positive experience with others than even a long-time patient would. As a result, we suggest that you encourage all new patients to refer to you with a simple friendly closing to their first appointment. Thank the patient for choosing your practice and say “if you have friends or family that are as nice as you, we would love to have them as patients too!”

After their initial visit – You should consider sending patients a handwritten card after their initial visit to thank them for making your practice their choice for dentistry. Include a “P.S.” at the end stating, “We hope you'll tell your friends and family about our office. We would love to have more patients just like you.”

When patients compliment your practice—This represents a natural time to ask for patient referrals. Respond to the compliment by saying, “We are glad that you had such a positive experience in our practice. We would love for your friends, family, co-workers, and relatives to have the same positive experience and would welcome them as new patients.”

At treatment completion – Asking for patient referrals is also natural when patients are near the end of a successful treatment. Asking the patient if they are pleased with the result and requesting the patient referral when they respond affirmatively, is an easy and natural lead in for many doctors.

Involve your team – Your staff may well know your current patient base better than you. In regular staff meetings, ask for patient referral suggestions that they would be comfortable implementing. Better yet, in the morning huddle, have the staff consider which patients to ask for referrals and make this part of your practice's regular routine. During your morning huddle identify one “A” patient per day that you will ask for a referral and then decide who on the team will ask.

Marketing your practice does not need to be an overt act or very expensive. For most patients, the perception of value and level of care has very little to do with what the doctor sees as important. In fact, 67% of patients will leave a practice because of indifference and/or how they were treated. The following are results of a survey characterizing the differences in what the patient and doctor value when choosing dental care.

If you will get started with 2 or 3 internal marketing ideas this month and then add just one per month for the next 12 months, you will be amazed at the results you will see in increased patient flow. An on-going, continuous marketing program that the team embraces and participates in is the key to increasing referrals and new patient flow.

Characteristics	Extremely Important	Describes Your Dr. Well	Gap
Treats you with dignity and respect	85	73	-12
Listens carefully to your healthcare concerns & questions	84	68	-16
Is easy to talk to	84	69	-15
Takes your concerns seriously	83	69	-14
Willing to spend enough time with you	81	62	-19
Truly cares about you and your health	81	63	-18
Has good medical/dental judgment	80	65	-15
Up-to-date with the latest research and treatment techniques	78	54	-24
Can see you at short notice if necessary	71	53	-18
Responds promptly when you call or e-mail with questions or concerns	60	38	-22
Has lots of experience treating patients with your condition	58	45	-13
Has been trained in the best schools	27	25	-2
Is of your own sex or gender	15	36	+21
Of your own race or ethnic background	10	30	+20