Brand Your Cosmetic Practice, Marketing Your Cosmetic Brand

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INTRODUCTION

Developing the right brand is key to cosmetic practice success. A brand allows people to identify your practice. As Amazon.com CEO Jeff Bezos says, “A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn a reputation by trying to do hard things well.” A strong brand establishes positive qualities about your practice in the minds of current and potential patients. Those favorable impressions created by your brand can lead to increased case acceptance, more patient referrals and, ultimately, greater profitability.

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Your brand drives your practice image. An effective brand should reflect the type of services performed in the practice. As practices add cosmetic services, many dentists fail to update their brands. The doctor may think of his or her practice as a modern cosmetic practice, but patients still perceive it as a typical general practice.
Patient interest in cosmetic procedures is increasing, due in part to the popularity of at-home whitening products and “makeover” shows. Many practices, however, are still struggling with the best ways to expand their cosmetic production beyond crowns and bridges. According to a 2005 survey commissioned by the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, respondents said that combined total production for whitening, implants, onlays/inlays, and veneers accounted for nearly one-quarter of their total production (24.4%)—slightly more than combined total production for whitening work alone (23.7%) (Fig 1). These four services represent areas of opportunity for practices looking to generate increased cosmetic and elective production. A well-defined brand can help unleash your potential for cosmetic dentistry. Just because a dentist has spent time and money to learn specific cosmetic skills does not mean that his or her practice will experience a substantial increase in cosmetic production.

Consider this example: A dentist invested more than $100,000 to transform his general practice into a cosmetically oriented office. He had done many things right, but he failed to do two critical things: brand the practice and then market the brand. Updating your brand as you upgrade your services is usually the best strategy to pursue.

**Developing a Practice Brand**

As dentists begin the process of developing a brand, they need to ask these questions:

- What is different about this practice?
- What are its strengths?
- What is the added value of coming to this practice?
- What sets it apart from the other practices in the area?
- To successfully rebrand my practice, do my team and I currently have the right skills?
- Are the practice’s hours of operation different from other area practices? Do we offer more or less convenience to patients?
- What intangibles (special awards, community services, etc.) does the practice possess that will help in developing our brand?
- What is different about this practice compared to this practice?
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By answering these questions, you have begun the process of determining the practice’s competitive advantages. These differentiators will help you to select what elements are needed to develop the right brand for the practice.

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All businesses need to have a competitive advantage. For instance, look at what different hospitals have done in recent years to highlight their brands. To gain market share, many medical facilities promote their different competitive advantages through advertising. These days, it is not uncommon to hear about a certain hospital’s heart center or cancer center. Each hospital is trying to define its competitive advantage in the marketplace. In this age of increased competition, dentists need to promote their competitive advantages to gain new patients, as well as retain current ones.

As you begin the process of developing your brand, you need to seek feedback from your team members and your patients. Often what the doctor perceives as a competitive advantage may not match the perceptions of staff and patients. For example, your practice may offer an elective service such as implants, but if the staff lacks proper training to educate patients about this service, patients will not be motivated to benefit from your supposed competitive advantage. Remember, building a brand requires “outside the office” thinking. View your practice through the eyes of your patients. Ask for patient feedback to make sure your competitive advantages are being communicated to patients. Seeking feedback is a way to confirm the accuracy of your own perceptions about the practice’s strengths and competitive advantages. As you change your brand, a short patient survey (5 to 10 questions) can provide valuable feedback on the success of your transformation. To keep the practice moving forward, Levin Group recommends an annual patient survey to measure practice performance.
ASSESSING CURRENT STATE VERSUS FUTURE VISION

After analyzing where the practice is in terms of current competitive advantages, the next series of questions will focus on where you want to take the practice:

• What services do you want to add to the practice?
• What current services do you want to increase?
• What percentage of your production will be cosmetic in three years? Five years?
• What system changes will need to be implemented to make your vision a reality?
• Does your current brand match your future vision? If not, what changes need to be made?

The hectic pace of most dental practices limits the time dentists have available to carry out management and leadership roles. A good method for creating a vision is to identify the most important practice goals you want to achieve in the next three to five years. Examples include increasing veneers by 15%, boosting whitening by two to four patients a week, and doubling implant production in the next two years. Your brand is a direct result of your practice vision.

To be effective, marketing must be consistent and ongoing.

IMPLEMENTING YOUR VISION

Successfully developing a practice vision requires planning and strategy. The following steps will help you achieve your vision:

1. Determine the components of the vision. Defining a vision is not an overnight process. Take a few weeks to determine the components of your vision, including the practice brand, your service mix, and goals for cosmetic production.
2. Write a vision statement and share it with your team, family, and advisors. Ask for their insights and consider their feedback. They may provide valid ideas, thoughts, or suggestions. Make any modifications you deem necessary.
3. Read the vision statement at least once every day. Read the vision statement aloud each morning at your morning meeting to continue to reinforce the message.
4. Set 12-month goals based on the vision statement. Remember that it may take three to five years (or even longer) to achieve your vision. Set goals with your team for the next 12 months that will move you closer to it. If your goal is to increase cosmetic production by 24%, your monthly goals should reflect a 2% increase.
5. Measure your goals on a regular basis. Be sure your goals are measurable, have deadlines, and are achievable. To ensure success, practices need to monitor their goals and make adjustments if necessary.
6. Review the vision annually. An in-depth annual review will help you determine if the vision is still realistic, accurate, and attainable.

Once your vision and brand are aligned, you will be able to move forward with marketing your competitive advantages. The development of the practice brand requires everyone on the team to buy into the brand. Long term, it requires the establishment of a practice culture to support the image. For example, a doctor cannot have an expensive cosmetic practice with an office décor that has not been updated since the 1970s. Only you can decide what you want your practice brand to be but, once you have made that choice, you need to create the image, determine the message, and communicate it to the staff so that it is communicated to patients. That is how successful practices are built today.

**Ensuring Consistent Marketing**

To be effective, marketing must be consistent and ongoing. It is not something that can be turned off and on at will; dental practices must market all the time. Allow the marketing program to break down and the practice will suffer the effects, including decreases in new patients, drops in production, and reduced profitability.

Patient flow often fluctuates in practices. There may be weeks and months when the dentist and the team are so busy that they worry about how to keep up. Then, all of a sudden, there is a slowdown and the dentist’s next thought is, “Will I ever see enough new patients?” This slowdown often occurs because marketing ceased when the schedule was busy. During slower times, the dentist may have taken more time to talk to patients, extra care was probably taken in case presentation, patients were asked for referrals, and close attention was paid to the recall system. Then, as the practice got busier, many of these marketing activities were neglected, resulting in fewer patients and lost production.

When a marketing program is consistent, the internal strategies, such as asking for patient referrals, educating patients about the practice’s competitive edge, and relaying the doctor’s unique qualifications will all become part of a clearly defined system. Marketing with continuity is not dependent on the daily motivation of the doctor or individual staff members. Rather, it is embedded in the practice’s systems, especially customer service.

As Levin Group Marketing Consultant Daniel Arlotti says, “Continuous marketing helps a practice bring in a steady stream of new patients. Stop-and-go marketing is by its very nature hit or miss.”

If you implement marketing strategies and then discontinue them during busy times, you will not maximize their effectiveness for the long run. Conversely, if you can implement an initial marketing program and carry it out continuously, you will find that the marketing builds upon itself, just like compound interest. Future marketing programs that support the practice image and competitive advantage will actually be more effective than if they had been implemented as part of a hit-or-miss program. The return on your marketing investment will be more significant if the program is continual, rather than implemented only during slow times.

Does the concept of continual marketing imply that the mix of marketing strategies will be the same year after year? Definitely not. Marketing programs should not be static—they should evolve to meet the changing needs of the practice. If the practice has added implants to its service mix, the practice brand and marketing materials should reflect this change. A doctor cannot pick a few marketing strategies and expect them to be the marketing program for the rest of his or her career. Specific marketing strategies should be constantly refined, modified, or replaced as the practice moves forward and adds new services. As the practice vision evolves or changes, marketing strategies must be revisited and realigned for maximum success.

**Marketing Your Brand**

Once you define the practice brand, it is essential that you incorporate it into your marketing program and use it to position your practice. Your competitive advantages will be the cornerstone for your marketing program. All of your basic marketing programs should reinforce and promote your competitive edge. In this way, you will be sending a clear and targeted message to your patients and the community.

To paraphrase a famous philosophical question, if a dentist offers whitening, but none of the patients know about this service, does the practice still offer whitening? Once a practice has defined its competitive advantages, it must make patients aware of its brand components repeatedly. The staff must be trained to emphasize and reinforce this messaging throughout the patient experience. Effective training tools include scripting every patient interaction, using morning meetings and staff meetings to reinforce superior
customer service, providing the team with outside-the-office training, and coaching the team throughout the day. Collateral materials, such as brochures and posters, must support the brand image. For example, if you have successfully branded yourself as the leading implant practice in the area, everything in the practice must in some way support this message, ranging from your on-hold phone messages to your letterhead to your advertising efforts.

During every patient interaction, the practice should educate patients about its brand. Internal marketing should incorporate the following strategies:

- When patients call your office to make an appointment, inform them about your cosmetic services. The on-hold message should contain information about all practice services.
- When new patients visit your office, give them information about your cosmetic services in the welcome packet.
- Direct patients to your Web site to learn about your practice and the cosmetic services you provide. If you do not have a Web site, you should consider creating one.
- When patients arrive for their appointments, have your front-desk coordinator help them sign in, offer them coffee or tea, and provide them with reading material about your cosmetic services.
- Include a cosmetic assessment in your comprehensive clinical exam. Make sure your hygienist discusses your patients’ current cosmetic conditions and their cosmetic options.
- Encourage your hygienist to set a goal of two patients per day accepting some level of cosmetic service.

By incorporating the above strategies, a larger percentage of your patients will have the opportunity to take advantage of your practice’s cosmetic services.

**Conclusion**

Branding takes time. Once you define your competitive advantages, the proper systems need to be implemented so that the idea of your brand matches the reality. Align your vision with your brand. Find the right service mix and train your staff on your brand. Use a mix of marketing strategies to educate and motivate patients about your services. By developing and marketing your brand, you will position yourself for continued success as a cosmetic dentist.