Marketing Your Dental Services Between Technicalities & Business

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Introduction

One might be astonished to find such a business title in a dental magazine, but we – as dentists – are in the service sector, and we sell our service to our patients, thus we need to be aware of the marketing techniques and how to professionally sell our service and gain more market share. Many dentists complain that they have the skill, the latest equipment, but are unable to attract customers or convince customers to perform treatments other than the routine treatments. This can be done by incorporating your technical information along with some marketing talents.

First of all, let’s try to find an answer to the following question:

Why is the Dental Service – as a business – lagging behind in our area?
The answer would be by defining the existing problem:

- Lack of pre-undergraduate management education
- Ignorance of managerial post-graduate education
- Lack of quality-oriented, managerial-oriented dental courses
- Lack of MARKETING skills
- Dentists’ awareness of the importance of the above

So the final point concludes that most of us do not know that we have a problem.

Do you know the needs of your customers?
The first step in our flow chart would be to understand the needs of our customers. But we have to differentiate between a NEED, a WANT and a DEMAND. We NEED to eat, but we WANT a pizza for example. So NEEDS are necessities like food, shelter, education. Those needs become Wants when they are directed to specific objects that satisfy this need. While DEMANDS are wants backed up by the ability to pay. Many of us want a Mercedes, but only few of us are able and willing to buy (P. Kotler 2000).

Maslow created a hierarchy of needs (Fig. 1), where he suggested that people must fulfill the lower level to go up the pyramid to the second level. For example, no one will care for shelter if he is hungry. And no one will think of joining a club at the time he has no home to live in.

- **Physiological needs:** Include food, water, air, etc.
- **Safety needs:** Like shelter, security, protection, etc.
- **Belonging needs:** The need for affiliation like family, friends, clubs, etc.
- **Esteem needs:** Self-esteem, recognition, status (like education, good job, etc.)
- **Self-actualization:** Self-development and realization (Very few people fulfill this need)

**Now how can we apply this theory dentally?**

Have a look at Figure 2, where I have modified the hierarchy.

- **Physiological needs:** All people need their teeth in order to eat.
- **Safety needs:** Periodic dental hygiene will prevent sudden pain or going frequently to dentists in emergency.
- **Belonging needs:** Proper speech, the social acceptance. All fall under this category
- **Esteem needs:** The need for esthetics and beauty.
- **Self-actualization:** For people who look for perfection (Hollywood white bleaching, twinkles).

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How to discover needs?

The easiest way is to just ask. Of course you will not ask directly, but some probing questions and guided, directed questions, open ended questions would uncover needs.

Your role would be to strike on needs by finding benefits (of your service) to meet those needs. If someone has some missing teeth, don’t just tell him the features of implants and how they look like. Instead, inform him the benefits of having implants, their success rate that is far higher than other options, their physiological benefits and so on. Remember that features describe something; while benefits tell you what it will do for you.

What we have been discussing and what we will go through now is a trial to meet the:

Common Marketing Communication Objectives:
- Create Awareness
- Create Understanding
- Change Attitudes/Perceptions
- Change Behavior
- Reinforce Previous Decisions & Attitudes

Thus let’s approach another fine model that could lead us all the way to the end.

The AIDA model (Fig. 3) is one of the simplest and widely used models in marketing, as you can observe, it is the same as our previous models where you start from bottom to the top, and here each step of the pyramid leads to the other. You cannot skip one step. You attract the attention of your patients; develop this attention to build up interest that will ignite the spark of desire forcing them to take positive action towards buying the service you were aiming to sell.

We might use several services in this model; implants, new bleaching units, etc.

AIDA Model: Attention

There are four basic ways to drag attention of patients:

1. Advertisement: Mainly brochures inside your clinic.
   A brochure must include:
   - Benefits of the service (implants for example)
   - Simplified illustrated stages of treatment
   - Success cases
   Never give up the idea of brochures, a recent study has shown that:
   The first time someone looks at an advertisement, he does not see it.
   The thirteenth time he thinks it must be a good thing.
   The twentieth time he sees it he buys it, or instructs his wife to do so.

2. Segmentation: Focus on some potential customers and verbally market your target service, using more illustrations than that in a brochure.

3. WOM: Word of mouth spreads faster than fire in dry hay. Satisfied customers would take care of that task (Also unsatisfied but in an opposite direction). Your role is to select the people that will spread the word around in your favor, these are normally known as:
4. **Opinion leaders:** These are people that have influence on other people and whom are always asked for recommendations, other people always put them under light and try to imitate them. Select as many as you can and offer them your targeted service in a professional way, no problem if you perform it for them at discounted price or even free. (Imagine a social star going around with her newly bleached teeth and informing everyone where she had them done).

Opinion leaders are characterized by being:
- High social class
- Rich or moderately rich
- Highly educated
- Have many contacts and friends

**AIDA Model: Interest**

Now that the patients are aware of the service, your role is to build up their interest, one way is by using BTQ (Benefit Tag Questions) where you incorporate a benefit in a question form like: Did you realize that by using the Light bleaching unit, we can jump three shades lighter in one session? Do you know your teeth could be as white as those in this picture? In building up interest you need to:
- Focus on leaders and those whom you think are good prospects
- Patient education (multi-media communication) could broaden their view
- Pros & Cons: Give them answers to all their concerns and strike on the positive aspects of the service (strike on benefits)
- Trail (single implant instead of 3 units bridge)
- Special introductory offers
- Testimonials: References that bought the service from among his/her friends or community (after permission of these patients)
- Fear of losing the chance to have the service while they can still afford

**AIDA Model: Desire**

Ignite the spark of desire by pressing on the buying motive. Each one in this world buys for one of six reasons only. While exploring the needs of your customers, try to locate their buying motive. This will help you choose the benefits that will trigger that motive.

**The Six Buying Motives:**

- **Make a gain:** Here I don’t just mean that you need to offer a discount or offer a bonus service above what you are selling. I mean that there are some people that depend on their teeth (phonetically and esthetically) in making their living like actors, teachers, sales reps. and everyone that makes his living by talking all the time.

- **Fear of loss:** We buy alarms, locks, and insurance policies for fear of losing something (including watches for fear of losing time). We can also apply that dentally in many cases; those who we convince to restore teeth for fear of losing it later and maybe losing more money replacing it (Physiological need). Those who are afraid of losing their esthetics (Esteem need).

- **Pleasure:** We buy holiday packages and go to fun-fairs and cinemas for pleasure. Patients will never go to dentists for pleasure, but having their teeth treated and enjoying the consequences is a pleasure. (They eat good, speak well, nice breath, good esthetics).

- **Avoidance of pain:** We buy medicine and go to hospitals to avoid pain. Needless to give dental examples for that.

- **Social approval:** We buy good clothes, wear perfumes and the like to feel socially approved. Anyone of a specific social level will feel ashamed to be among his peers with ugly looking teeth or phonetic defects or even bad breath.

- **Pride:** Such patients are the dream of all dentists; they are the ones that buy signee products, ride fancy cars. But many Nouveau riche also fall under this category. Such patients would easily buy anything to show off. Like twinkles, bleaching, implants. Just name anything expensive. Sometimes they are just proud that they paid multi thousands for treating their teeth at a fancy dental center.

**AIDA Model: Action**

Considering the above was properly performed, positive action will be the result in most cases.

This article introduced some of the basics of marketing, I have applied with you the first step of the AIDA model; which is dragging your attention to the importance of a skill that you need to acquire, which is the Marketing Skill.