

My marketing plan

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_2012: are you staring into the abyss? Have you a thought out a plan for how you are going to continue growing your business? Are you going to continue doing what you do and see diminishing returns in our struggling economy or wing it and take up opportunities as they present themselves?

I would suggest you formulate your vision for three years from now. Include every area: team, marketing, sales, operations, customer service, finance, etc.

You need to imagine that you are walking into your practice three years from now. What do you see? What are patients saying about your practice? What is the team talking about in the staff

room? What does your day look like? What treatments are you carrying out? What are your plans for the evening? Think about it NOW and WRITE it down. Studies repeatedly show that writing your thoughts down and then sharing them with your close friends make them more likely to happen. It makes you accountable.

Your vision document will probably fill three pages. Re-read and refine it. Once you are happy with it, share it with your team. It will help them understand their role and whether this is the sort of practice they would love to be associated with. Once you have your plans, don't just bury them away in your desk. Take them out at least every month and read them out loud. Do they still excite you? Perhaps you have changed your mind. Tweak and revisit this picture regularly.

_Marketing first steps

Before you formulate an expensive plan of how you are going to populate your daybook with loads of new patients, ask yourself: Do you know what sort of patients you want to treat? Do you know why your current patients come and see you? What is your ideal patient?

Everyone has a different idea of what makes a patient ideal; some characteristics are non-negotiable, like 'pays their bills on time'; some may not be important to you, like 'smells nice'. For me, the ideal patient:

- _ is punctual and informs you if he or she is running late;
- _ pays bills on time without hassle;
- _ is a raving fan (enjoys being in your practice and refers others, who also become raving fans)—some practices never need to do any marketing; the raving fans do it for them;
- _ respects you and other team members—often they are respectful to the clinical team but not to the office staff;
- _ listens to your clinical advice and then makes an informed decision;
- _ attends all maintenance and hygiene appointments as prescribed; and

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Fig. 1

smells nice and knows which end of a toothbrush to use and actually uses it!

Just ask your existing patient base and as you slowly weed out the subprime ones you will eventually be left with a majority of ideal patients. Among these, there will be some who fit all the criteria but only attend when they have a mini-crisis. They are to all intents and purposes ideal because when they visit you they follow all your advice and become healthy again, although they usually disappear into the ether until another mini-crisis looms.

Many clinicians find asking for referrals quite stressful and wonder what to do if the patient refuses. I have never had this happen, probably thanks to a technique I have developed. It needs a bit of practice, but the following line (your version of it) tends to work, especially if it is delivered after a course of treatment:

"You know what, Mrs Graham, I have really enjoyed taking care of you over the last few weeks. Our practice grows by recommendations from people like you. If you know any family members, friends or colleagues who need treatment I would love to take care of their dental needs. Here are a couple of my business cards."

I would empower all of the clinical team to have this conversation at the end of a course of treatment before the patient goes back into the re-care system. I also believe in the use of referral cards (Fig. 1). These should encompass the ethos of your practice and establish an emotional connection to what you believe in.

What do you do when they contact you?

Often the first contact is asking for prices. It is impossible for you to know whether such prospective patients are just fishing around to compare prices and that is the way they judge dental services. Perhaps that is the only way they know to judge dentistry and it is your opportunity to educate them that dentistry is not chosen on price alone. Does your team just reply back to them, do they try to call them and encourage them to visit your practice? Often the team replies to an e-mail, doesn't get a response and then deletes the e-mail. What would your results be if you tried again a day later to contact them?

If still no joy, perhaps contact them again in a week. "You recently contacted us and we have

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LONDON DENTAL PRACTICE OF THE YEAR - Bow Lane Dental Group

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Fig. 2

been unable to get in touch. I was just seeing whether your dental needs have already been taken care of. If not, we would love to have the opportunity to show you how Bow Lane is different from other practices. Please get back in contact and we look forward to welcoming you to our practice." I would then file their contact details and perhaps if they had asked about a specific service, say Invisalign, then make contact again when you have an offer or new information on that particular service.

Online presence

You don't need an award-winning website, but can the type of patients you are trying to attract find you online? When they find you, is what they see attractive, giving them confidence in contacting you? Do you have many different ways for them to contact you?

I have noticed recently more new patients contacting me via Facebook or Twitter. I think this is because dentists can seem inapproachable and hidden behind the reception team. They tend to ask a simple question and the conversation grows from that. I am in the middle of a €6,000 treatment plan on a patient from Vienna. He found me



through Facebook and there were 24 e-mails over a two-month period until he started treatment. How easy is it for a patient to have a conversation with you (Fig. 2)?

Why should a patient be friends with your practice on Facebook or Twitter? People like to



Fig. 4

feel part of something, a community. People like to talk, share stories and get access to unique information, whether it is hearing about something first or getting deals. Think about the newsletters you subscribe to, the people you follow on Twitter, etc. If they are always trying to sell something, you quickly get bored or find them inauthentic.

No matter what the technology you are using is, it is about a quality interaction with like-minded people. I get concerned when people get all excited about the latest thing, for example QR (quick response) codes (Fig. 3). It does not stop you communicating with that person any differently; it is just a fast way of them accessing information. Don't just jump on the next bandwagon; get your team interacting in an authentic and engaging way FIRST. The only way you can do this is to hire the right people and then it's over to good leadership and training.

Are the different ways of contacting you clearly visible? Gone are the days when dentists were stuck in ivory towers. The consumer is well informed and their attitude to discounts and deals is really changing.

Now not just about saving money: it's the excitement, the chase of the best deal. Groupon has opened consumers eyes. I definitely don't recommend that a dental practice start advertising on these sites; some practices nearly went bankrupt when they did.

MORE FOR LESS: While many people may have less money to spend right now, consumers everywhere will forever look to experience more. What is your customer experience?

THE MEDIUM IS THE MOTIVATION: Consumers are now being alerted to offers and deals via new (and therefore infinitely more exciting and attractive) technologies.

BEST OF THE BEST: With instant mobile or online access to not only deals but also reviews, consumers can now be confident they're getting the best price for the best product or service. What does your Google review say?

And next? An even bigger 'deal ecosystem', more personalisation, more loyalty schemes, more pressure on you to deliver deal-immune brilliance as an integral part of your dental care.

Brush strokes:

- _ Look at ALL your marketing materials and practice stationery. Is it all on brand?
- _ Take a look at your Google reviews.
- _ Take a look at your website on mobile devices like the Blackberry, iPhone and iPad.
- _ Why should a patient follow you on social media?

There has never been a better time to be in dentistry. But what does the future hold?_

_ about the author

cosmetic
dentistry



Dr James Goolnik is founder of the Bow Lane Dental Group in London, England. It was voted London practice of the year in 2006. Dr Goolnik is immediate past-president of the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry and serves on the Board of the British Dental Bleaching Society. He has produced the world's first dental practice iPhone app. He recently launched the *Heart Your Smile* campaign (Fig. 4), an inspirational movement for changing the public's perception of UK dentistry. Dr Goolnik is a key opinion leader and was voted the most influential person in UK Dentistry in 2011. He is the author of *Brush: Proven strategies to make you and your dental business shine*, which can be purchased via his website www.jamesgoolnik.com or www.amazon.com. All the profits go to building a dental clinic in Cambodia.

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