

Marketing 101: The Art of the Referral

Consider the type of patient you would like in your practice. Stop spending time putting out fires that consume valuable time and energy, with problem patients. Spend more time with your preferred patients and their friends. Birds of a feather really do flock together.

Patient surveys show that the majority of patients find out about dental practices from other friends who are already patients. This has consistently been the method of choice for patients to identify and locate a new dentist.

Traditionally, all professional relationships have been developed through personal contact. Your practice will not be any different. Just ask other health professionals such as your CPA or attorney. They know, all to well, the power of a well-placed referral

Yes, it is true, advertising works. It's just that it works with the wrong group of individuals. Anyone can create large volume if you give away dentistry at a discount or accept every patient who calls.

It is far more rewarding to build a practice of patients who seek you out because they are looking for the unique dentistry you are trained to provide. Far, far more rewarding to have them curious about the problems you can solve for them, because *their friend raved* about you and your staff.

If you would like to build a practice upon the referrals of your most preferred-type patients, well then, just ask them to refer their friends. Take these action steps to get started:

- √ Get comfortable with the idea yourself.
- √ Discuss the idea with the staff at your next staff meeting.
- √ Make a list of the characteristics of your most preferred-type patient. Get agreement on what you are looking for
- √ Practice with the staff ways you can ask for a referral that will be comfortable for them. Help them to create an outline of what they would like to say without making them remember a script.
- √ Review the schedule each day and decide what patient you would like to ask for a referral.
- √ Ask every staff member to select a patient.
- √ Track how many patients are asked.
- √ Document the date and who asked.
- √ Track what patient referred the most new patients.
- √ Set a good example. Do not be surprised when the staff follows suit after watching the doctor take the lead asking for referrals.

Look for opportunities to ask for a referral, such as after the patient has complimented the practice.

Be proactive. Create opportunities that lead to compliments. During a post-treatment evaluation of the patient's progress, ask them if you have been able to meet with their expectations.

“Ms. Jones, I have to admit, we really enjoy having you here in our practice as a patient. Have we lived up to your expectations?”

“Gosh Doctor, you and your staff have been fantastic. I could not be more pleased!”

“Ms. Jones, we’re glad you feel that way. We work hard to create a rewarding experience for all our patients. Matter of fact, if you have any friends who are looking to have any dentistry done, and want to tell them about us, we would be happy to take just as good care of them as we have of you.”

Let patients know they are special in your practice and a referral from them would be considered a compliment. Patients like to be acknowledged and given permission to refer. For all they know, you have all the patients you can handle.

Patients rarely make a referral based on a logical point of view, more often than not; their decision to refer will be based purely on emotion.

What evokes or influences emotion:

The first impression of your office.

Your personal appearance and the appearance of the office.

- The history your client brings; IE: stereotypes, expectations, past experiences.
- Snap judgments or biases by patients about certain procedures or services without consideration of all the evidence.
- Reliance on irrelevant information.

Patients will feel positive about you when they experience gratitude, acceptance, happiness, relief or excitement. Emotions such as anger, disappointment, sadness, disgust, hurt, frustration, fear, and confusion have the patient feel negative about you.

When patients feel good about themselves because of the experience they had with you or with your office, they tell others. The ensuing reputation that develops keeps your name where it should be. Social pressure has a stronger influence on people than mass media.

Positive emotions are around when . . .

- We help the patient “fit in,” belong, satisfy long burning desires.
- We tap onto core values held by the patient.
- We present a solution to a problem.
- We surprise them with something extra.
- The procedure makes the patient feel important.
- The patient feels competent.
- We show genuine concern for them.
- They decide on what makes them feel better. (Not you or us.)
- Accepting treatment has some excitement built into it.
- We are sincere in our dealings with them.

Your objective should be to create an experience that so overwhelms your patients with its positive side that small problems are insignificant. You cannot expect a patient to say anything about your practice if you simply meet their basic expectations to be greeted by name, seen on time, treated with courtesy, compliant with OSHA regulations, provide a pain-free experience, office to be clean and, up-to-date equipment and furniture.

Getting past basic expectations:

Are all relationships with the patient and each staff member healthy? Friendliness alone is not excellent service. All staff must be:

-well trained in their jobs
-communicative
-courteous
-energetic
-attentive and caring

-confident
-reliable
-credible
-knowledgeable
-an attitude of “*I can do it for you now.*”

- ▶ What systems are in place to provide responsiveness (availability)?
- ▶ What is your ability to solve a patient’s problem or help them get what they desire?
- ▶ Can you create value for the fee paid? Can you help the patient understand what they are paying for and what makes the procedure so expensive?
- ▶ Can patients get answers to questions?

Develop a referral base.

1. Create a list of patients, specialists, and other professionals who currently refer to the practice now.
2. Create a list of specialists and other professionals who do not currently refer to the practice but know you or about you and can talk to others. Identify what these individuals should know about you. Create a strategy to keep them up-to-date.
3. Consider what information should be available for patients to help build your reputation.
4. Identify patients who are always into new things, the innovators, ask about what they are trying or would like to try. Then have samples available for them to use and give to others.
5. Focus on those who have referred before.
6. When you take up a suggestion from someone, tell everyone else, for example mail an announcement letter.
7. Ask vendors if there are ways **you** can get their information to patients. Also, get them to help you with names or contacts.
8. Provide service to someone influential - even one of your best referral sources, specialist or member of their staff. Make the offer even if they never take you up on it. Let well-known people like your pastor, rabbi, or preacher know, that as a favor to them, you would donate your services to someone in need if they asked you. To pay back this favor, this “well-known” person will quietly promote you on their own.
9. Find out what group (professional or social) your best patients belong to - offer to make a presentation at their next meeting or help them with a donation.

10. Always follow-up quickly with good referrals sources after their last interaction or appointment with you. Send something about what was discussed, like an article or brochure, or even a short thank-you note.
11. Be prepared to discuss what is going on in dentistry. Provide a comparison of procedures or products.
12. Be seen as a leader among your peers.
13. Network with companies or organizations through current patients. Offer to help those new to the area, speak to the Human Resource Manager, provide emergency services to select groups (become the Doctor of record).
14. Every patient should be given a Post Treatment Evaluation.
15. Select patients every day to be given a “TLC Call” after difficult treatment.
16. Make an attempt to learn why a patient has left the practice.
17. Talk with personal trainers, spa owners, dieticians, and healthcare educators. They always want to know how their ideas work. Find out what they promote and see how it relates to what you do. You can also provide them with information they can give to others. Become a resource for them, a person to learn from.

It is not enough for you to be good at what you do. You must also be good at promoting what you do. There is no amount of money to be spent that can influence a potential patient, in the same way, as a testimonial from a satisfied patient with first hand experience of what you really can do.

Larry M. Guzzardo who has co-authored two books, “Powerful Practice” and “Getting Things Done” conducts in-office practice management consultations exclusively for dentists to enhance trust, create organization, increase profits, and the development of patient relationships that last. Larry has presented numerous workshops including, “Winning Patient Acceptance,” “Business Communication Systems,” and “The Leadership Challenge.” For information call 800-782-5770