



Don't let the treatment get ahead of the diagnosis

For more on this topic, go to www.dentaleconomics.com and search using the following key words: *marketing, practice development, marketing focus, practice goals.*

Imagine — if you can — THIS BRIEF SCENARIO HAPPENING IN YOUR OFFICE ...

A new patient presents and, before you've said more than a friendly greeting, he immediately requests a prescription for an antibiotic to treat a painful tooth.

How's that again?

"Yes," he says, totally sure of his self-prescribed treatment plan. *"Could you please write the prescription so I can be on my way? And thank you very much."*

This is fiction, of course, but it illustrates our point. We don't know a single dentist who would seriously entertain a patient's own treatment request without a proper and thorough history, exam, X-rays, or whatever else is appropriate to a well-considered and proper professional diagnosis.

Hold that thought.

As we talk to practices around the nation, at least once a week someone will call and tell us they "need a flyer" or they "want a newspaper ad" or something else intended (they believe) to grow the practice. Our concern, of course, is that the "treatment" appears to be getting ahead of a proper "diagnosis" marketing-wise. And when we ask probing questions about the true nature of their needs, that is all too often the case. They have jumped to a conclusion and not a solution.

The first four questions to ask:

In determining what's needed for a successful marketing program, you first need to carefully walk through some discovery questions. Take your time with this "diagnostic" step and don't jump ahead. Invest the time to ask yourself questions and get a clear and unbiased perspective on where you are and what you need to do to achieve your practice development goals.

Here are the first four things to decide:

1 What, exactly, is the goal?

Begin with the end in mind: What is the quantified outcome? Goals are best expressed in specific amounts, such as increased revenue dollars, the number of new patients, or treatment plans begun.

The terms *goal*, *strategy*, and *tactic* are sometimes incorrectly used interchangeably. A *goal* is the big picture expressed as a number. A *strategy* or *strategies* are the ways the goal will be achieved. *Tactics* are the tools that achieve the strategies.

So if you're thinking you need a new tactical tool of any kind, it should be because it specifically supports one or more strategies to achieve the goal. Define the goal first, then decide strategy, and then the most effective tactical tool — plan in that order.

2 What is the likely return on investment (ROI)?

Because marketing generates revenue (not an expense), elements of a marketing plan produce a measurable ROI — provided, of course, that you are tracking results daily. Can you predict or at least estimate the ROI as part of the plan?

Here's a hint: the overall goal for a good plan is to have about a 4:1 return on investment. Tactics individually and collectively need to generate a positive ROI, but some tactics will have a higher or lower ROI — and the only way to know is to diligently track the source for each new patient. Some of our other articles in this series can provide guidance, or give us a call and ask about our experiences.

3 Am I faithfully sticking to my marketing plan?

Sometimes a practice will lose marketing focus. For any of a hundred reasons, maybe marketing is neglected or forgotten. Or perhaps the competition is advertising via skywriting, and your office is highly tempted to answer with a skywriting campaign of your own — but it's not part of the plan. *Stick with your plan.* Make appropriate adjustments if needed, but don't do impulsive add-ons or fail to stay on track.

4 Don't have a plan?

If you don't have a well-considered, evidence-based marketing plan, you can skip questions 1, 2, and 3. Develop a professional plan first. The selection of any tactic without the context of a plan (with goals, strategies, tactics, budget, schedule, tracking, etc.) is an open-ended risk.

And maybe this is a case where a prescription for an antibiotic is exactly what's needed ... but then again, you don't really know. If you try to set the course of treatment before you develop a clear diagnosis, your results are likely to be an unhealthy and wasteful mistake. **DE**

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