
External Marketing with Class and Style to General Dentists

Robert Fry

The present difficult economy is causing a remarkable decrease in patients seeking orthodontic care. The adverse economy has also had a negative impact on general dental practices. Although all desire a speedy economic recovery, it is prudent to prepare for a long period of recovery. In this article, some strategies will be evaluated that could benefit referring general dentists and hopefully result in better relations with the general dentist and increase patient referrals to the orthodontic office. Marketing has become a necessity. (Semin Orthod 2011;17:304-308.) © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

It is estimated that a poll of orthodontists would show the most disliked aspect of running a private practice is the need to market the practice to their general dental colleagues. It would be preferable that offices were opened and patients arrived in abundance simply because orthodontists are nice people and do excellent work. That may have been the case some years ago, but in the present-day climate, it is important to be more proactive in promoting orthodontic practices.

Four aspects of marketing that are appreciated by general dentists:

1. Inform
2. Listen
3. Offer business assistance
4. Show gratitude

Inform

The single most powerful way to market the orthodontic office to general dental colleagues is to keep them informed about their patients undergoing treatment in the orthodontic office and the efforts that are being made to enhance

their patient's orthodontic experience in the office.

Immediately after a patient schedules a new examination with the orthodontic office, the orthodontic receptionist should call the dentist to thank them for the opportunity to work with their patient and ask for any records/information that may be of help for the initial orthodontic examination. The receptionist should always say something, such as, "we sure appreciate working with your office." It is very effective if the receptionist has the name of each receptionist from the referring offices. A note should be entered in the patient's chart of this conversation. It is very reassuring to point out to the new patient at the initial examination that the orthodontist has taken the initiative to closely coordinate their orthodontic treatment with their dentist.

If the patient schedules an appointment to begin treatment, call the patient's dentist to be sure all needed work/recalls are current. It is poor management to have a general dentist calling to indicate that they did not know their patient was beginning orthodontic treatment and, in addition, informing that there is still general dental work to be done and requesting that some orthodontic appliances be removed to allow for completion of the dental procedures.

Customized letters should be written to the patient's dentist with updates on the orthodontic treatment. It is recommended that each office have a systematic approach to keep dentists informed of patient care. The author's office

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uses a checklist to generate letters that are sent to the dentist before, during, and after treatment. For example, before treatment one needs to inform the dentist if the patient has chosen a limited option of treatment (less than full comprehensive care). During treatment there may be a need to coordinate multidisciplinary procedures (eg, implants for missing teeth). It is always wise to inform the dentist of any patient complaints and resolution in writing and by phone. It is best if the general dentist learns of the situation from the orthodontist first. After treatment, the dentist should be reminded of the patient's choice for limited treatment, or of any treatment objectives that were not achieved and the reasons for it. In addition, it should always be noted that the orthodontic office has instructed the patient to see their dentist for an examination.

Dental colleagues should always be informed about the orthodontic efforts to ensure excellent quality of orthodontic and personal care for their patients. Provide information on any new procedures/techniques being used in the orthodontic office (eg, self-ligation, Invisalign [Align Technology, San Jose, CA], temporary anchorage devices, or any others). Also, inform referring dentists of any efforts to enhance their patient's and parent's experience in the orthodontic office (eg, providing wireless Internet and an Internet bar). Information can be provided in several ways. Newsletters that are sent to the orthodontic patients should also be sent to referring offices. Mail a copy of journal articles that may be of interest to one's dental colleagues.

Develop a 45-minute PowerPoint presentation featuring the latest and greatest about the orthodontic office. Before and after pictures of treatment outcomes are very popular (especially if their own patients are shown). Providing a lunch and presentation to the dentist and staff over their lunch hour is more effective and less disruptive for them if done in their office. It is doubly appreciated if efforts are made with the State Dental Board to have the presentation qualify for continuing education. Hygienists have more limited options to obtain continuing education credits than their dentists. It has been found that the hygienist makes more direct orthodontic referrals than the dentist.

Listen

Most people are appreciative if they feel they that have been heard and understood. Dental offices are more likely to refer if they feel the orthodontic office has made an effort to hear their concerns and wishes for their patients. The following are several ways that an atmosphere of listening can be created:

During an office visit or over lunch, be sure and ask whether their office has any special requests for their patients. Be sure to write down specifically what those requests are and take them back to the orthodontic office team. This is the easy part. The difficult part is to develop an internal system to ensure that the specific requests of each office are honored.

It has been enlightening to survey the referring office every 4-5 years; Fig. 1 is an example of a survey cover letter, and Fig. 2 is an example of the general dentist survey. Not only are the dentists surveyed, but each staff member (receptionists, assistants, and hygienists) are surveyed as well. The author has found that occasionally the dentist refers patients, but that the hygienist or receptionist undermines the referral. The best way to discover reasons for the latter directed at the orthodontist's office is to ask.

Offer Business Assistance

Although it is not the orthodontist's charge to secure the financial well-being of referring dental offices, some subtle help is appreciated. The following has been found to be welcomed:

Be very generous with praise of the referring office. Encourage staff to go out of their way to compliment the referring office. Staff will be more likely to do this if the orthodontist leads by example. Praising the referring office is an obvious action, but is often overlooked during the busy day.

Help keep patients current with recall visits with their dentists. Each patient is asked at every visit if they are current with their dental care. Interestingly, a more candid response is received if the child is asked as opposed to asking the parent. If any equivocation about their status with their dentist is expressed, the orthodontist should send a custom letter to the dentist. It is recommended that the letter indicate "Your patient, (name), was in for a visit today and stated that he/she was not sure if he/she is up to date with his/her regular

Dear Doctor and Staff,

Enclosed you will find several survey questionnaires for you and your staff members. Because we would like to provide you with the best service possible, we would appreciate it if you could fill out these confidential questionnaires and return them in the envelope provided or fax to (913)469-6491 to the attention of Shaulene. The information will be compiled and you will be provided with a feedback report.

We always appreciate your suggestions and thank you for taking the time to complete and return this information. Your cooperation and frank answers are greatly appreciated as we look forward to working with you and your patients in the future.

Sincerely,

Dr. Bob Fry and Dr. Jeremy Fry

Enclosures: surveys

Figure 1. Example of general dentist survey cover letter.

dental care in your office. Could you check your records and advise him/her if an appointment with you is needed?"

Nothing is more appreciated than a referral back to the general dentist. Receiving credit for the referral is achieved by sending a letter of introduction with a phone number and permission from the patient to have the dental office call them directly. Orthodontists often receive requests from patients seeking a general dentist. The orthodontic receptionist should make a single referral from a list of the general dental offices the orthodontist enjoys working with the most. Send a letter of introduction (including contact information) to the dental office, even though they may not be orthodontic patients.

On occasion, orthodontic patients request a referral to a family dentist because they are unhappy with their current one. Although this is an opportunity to reciprocate to referring general dentists, great care must be taken not to refer these patients away from one of the orthodontist's main referral sources. It is nearly always best for the orthodontist to try to ascertain why these patients want a new dentist, and to help resolve any issues. Unhappiness can often be easily resolved and thus save the relationship these patients have with their current dentist.

If the general dental office does some of their own orthodontic treatment, then offer to help

them, particularly with a problematic situation. Although this may seem very distasteful to orthodontists, this help can generate a significant amount of good will. It is highly inflammatory to state or imply that any orthodontic care provided by their general dentist was inappropriate or below the standard of care. In most cases, the author will not charge fees for completing the dentist's orthodontic treatment.

Providing an annual appreciation seminar (usually 4 hours) is greatly appreciated. Bringing in a good speaker who can help the dentist and staff in managing their business via a clinical, administrative, or marketing topic is appreciated. Obtaining continuing education credit from the State Board for this seminar enhances this activity. This seminar can create a great amount of work and can be quite expensive, depending on the quality of the speaker and how many will attend the seminar. However, it provides an excellent opportunity for networking and to show the desire to reciprocate to the offices who refer their patients.

Show Gratitude

Psychological research has shown convincing evidence that the happiest people are those

Please circle your position in the office:

Doctor Hygienist Assistant Receptionist Other _____

We want to thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The information you share will help us continue to improve our services to you and your patients.

Rate the quality of service based on the scale below:

- | | Always
1 | Usually
2 | Sometimes
3 | Rarely
4 | Never
5 |
|-----------|--|--------------|----------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. _____ | Are you pleased with the overall quality of care we provide to your patients? | | | | |
| 2. _____ | Do we respond quickly to your requests for service? | | | | |
| 3. _____ | Is written or e-mail correspondence from our office adequate and concise? | | | | |
| 4. _____ | Are phone communications from our office prompt and concise? | | | | |
| 5. _____ | Are you pleased with the communication you receive from our office while your patients are under our care? | | | | |
| 6. _____ | Do you feel that we are sensitive to your patients' financial needs? | | | | |
| 7. _____ | Have your patients indicated that they have been treated courteously by our staff? | | | | |
| 8. _____ | Have your patients indicated to you that they are seen on time for their appointments? | | | | |
| 9. _____ | Are your patients routinely returning to you for follow-up care? | | | | |
| 10. _____ | Are your patients pleased with the final results of treatment in our office? | | | | |
| 11. _____ | Have we educated your patients adequately in caring for their appliances? | | | | |
| 12. _____ | Have we educated your patients properly regarding retention care? | | | | |
| 13. _____ | Overall, would you recommend us to other patients? | | | | |
| 14. _____ | To which office do you usually refer? Overland Park Olathe Stanley | | | | |

Comments/ Suggestions:

Office Name (optional): _____

Fry Orthodontic
Specialists
~Since 1977~
For the smile of your life!

Figure 2. Example of general dentist survey form.

who are grateful. Orthodontists should be grateful to the dental offices that support them, even when attempts of gratitude seem to be unappreciated. The following are some ways to show gratitude:

Taking small food gifts to referring offices is much appreciated. Chocolate is always most appreciated by staff. It is important for the orthodontist to do an office delivery personally at least once per year. It can be very effective to have an

energetic staff member deliver these items at other times throughout the year.

Be involved in dental issues. Donate time serving in local, state, and national dental societies.

Stay current on topics important to referring dentists by reading the American Dental Association Journal and attending meetings not necessarily about orthodontics.

Offer free or discounted treatment for the referring dentist's family and staff. Give your dentists several "monetary certificates" for discounts on orthodontic treatment in your office to be given out to needy families.

Give back to dentistry and the community. Donate time and/or money to worthy dental

charities. Work in free clinics or at dental fairs providing general dental care.

Conclusions

When orthodontic residents from the University of Southern California and University of the Pacific visit the author's office and see the amount of effort given to marketing, they often feel overwhelmed. "Do I really need to do all this just to straighten teeth?" they ask. The obvious answer is no. One can have a successful orthodontic practice and lifestyle if one chooses to not market the practice. However, in the current difficult market, it is wise to promote oneself in an ethical manner.