

HOW TO ATTRACT AND MAINTAIN NEW PATIENTS: BEING THE WHITE TREE IN THE DENTAL COMMUNITY'S FOREST

BY **MARVIN BERLIN, DDS**

don't know about your community, but here in North Texas and specifically McKinney, Texas, there seems to be a new dental office opening every week on every corner. On top of that, the ever-increasing expense of dental marketing is scary. Traditional marketing platforms such as television, radio, billboards, magazine ads, and direct mail can generate a decent return on investment, but typically are very expensive. But there are actions you can take to significantly enhance your ability to acquire new patients and maintain existing patients. Best of all, it requires only effort.

When we evaluate our new-patient flow each month, we have two broad categories:

1. Things that cost us money
2. Things that don't cost us money

This article focuses on the latter — specifically the things we do to attract, maintain, and completely care for patients, without any cost.

First, we need to look at the typical dental community from the viewpoint of our patients. When potential patients look for a dentist, why do they choose one office over another? Look at the graphic in Figure 1.

Our goal is to be the “white tree” in our dental community's forest.

This is one of my favorite pictures because it represents our typical dental community. Obviously, we're all drawn to the white tree, but let's take a look at the other trees. They're alive and healthy, with stable roots and flourishing leaves. This is

FIG. 1



an excellent representation of community dental offices in general. Many successful offices exist, but one always stands out. If all of these trees were dental offices, most of them would see nearly any patient.

Some dental practices perform root canals. Some refer them out. Some see kids. Some don't. Some are open on Fridays. Most are not. Some take insurance. Most do not. Some have extended hours. Most do not. Some do extractions. Many do not. Some provide sedation. Some don't.

But there's one office (or one tree) that does it all. There's one office that's willing to do what other offices will not, and one office that strives to meet every need of the community. We want to be this office, the “white tree.” Whenever new patients in need move to our community, we want to be here for them.

How do you become the “white tree”? There are certain things you can do to help you stand out. As a clinical director and affiliated dentist at Heartland Dental Care, I've helped teach dentists

all over the country how to implement these ideas. Here are the top 10 actions we take in McKinney:

NO. 1. VISIT LOCAL PHARMACIES

This may be dentistry's biggest untapped market. Whether you realize it or not, a lot of people who are experiencing pain will go to their pharmacist before they will call their doctor, especially those with dental-related pain. On your day off, visit all your local pharmacies to let them know you handle dental emergencies and that you're prepared to take care of patients on the spot. It goes without saying that clinically you need to be willing and comfortable to provide emergency care. When you relieve a patient's pain, especially on the spot, he or she will be your patient for life. Another big plus is to invite your pharmacists to be patients in your practice, and consider giving them a professional courtesy discount.

NO. 2. CALL PATIENTS

The other day while I was playing tennis, a patient of mine was also playing, and he introduced me to one of his friends. He said, “This is Dr. Berlin. You'll really like him; he calls you after your appointments.” I was amazed. Personally, I was hoping to be known for being the best or being gentle or having great preps. But in this patient's eyes, the most important thing was that I called him after his dental work. After each day, call your patients and check on them. Your staff can keep a list of the day's patients, procedures, and phone numbers for you at the end of the day. You can't imagine how much your patients will appreciate this.

NO. 3. ASK FOR REFERRALS

There's no cheaper and *better* patient than one who is referred. Make it a point to ask your patients to refer their families and friends. I typically ask this after I receive a compliment. For example, while giving anesthetic, if a patient says, “I didn't feel that at all,” I say, “Tell all your friends!” Or if we've just seated a beauti-

ful veneer case, I always say, "OK, I want you smiling all over town ... you're my new billboard!"

NO. 4. ASK FOR ONLINE REVIEWS

Online reviews are becoming more important. When a case or appointment goes exceptionally well, ask your patient to leave a review for you. The major sites are Google, Yelp, Yahoo!, and Angie's List. The best way to rid yourself of negative reviews (don't worry, we all get them) is to flood those sites with positive reviews.

NO. 5. WORK IN TREATMENT OUT OF HYGIENE

With any treatment diagnosed in hygiene, ask the patient, "Would you like to do that today?" Typically patients will take off work to come in for hygiene appointments, and some even schedule a babysitter for their kids. Be willing and flexible to invite your patients to stay and get their treatment done that same day. They will appreciate it and so will your bottom line.

NO. 6. HANDLE ALL EMERGENCIES ON THE SPOT

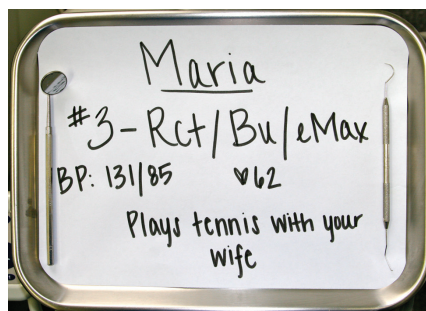
When a patient calls with any emergency, we say, "How soon can you get here?" If they say, "I'm on my way," we know they have a true dental emergency. If they say, "I can be there late this afternoon," we know it's not a true emergency. We still want them in, but we know it's not as urgent. If you don't have an operator available, have your hygienist visit with the patient until the problem is diagnosed. If you have to bring the patient back to a consultation room to talk, that's OK. The patient will appreciate that. If the patient can't start treatment today (this is very rare), I anesthetize him or her with a few carpules of Marcaine for relief.

NO. 7. GREET EVERY PATIENT BY NAME AND WITH ENTHUSIASM

We have a greeter whose No. 1 priority is to welcome *every* patient as if he or she were visiting our home. This person needs a gorgeous smile, welcoming personality, and — most importantly — the ability to remember or at least anticipate

names. "Good morning, Mrs. Jones. No need to sign in, I'll let Dr. Berlin know you're here. They'll have you back shortly." Patients, and people in general, like hearing their names.

Speaking of names, I'm horrible with them. I sometimes forget who I'm working on in the middle of treatment. Yikes! To help with this, I have my assistants write in big bold letters the patient's name, the procedure, their blood pressure, pulse, and any other pertinent information on the tray covers under my mirror and explorer so I can see the information when I walk into the room, and I can peek during the middle of a procedure when I have a "senior moment."



NO. 8. BE INTERESTED, NOT INTERESTING

Listen to your patients. Let them tell you their stories. Let them describe what's going on in their lives and in their mouths. Take good notes so that during their next appointment, you can ask about their grandkids or how their vacation went. Let them open up emotionally. Ask questions instead of talking. The doctor/patient relationship is completely dependent on communication and getting your patients to share their experiences. The communication courses offered by Heartland Dental Care have also helped our practice build in this area.

NO. 9. VISIT ASSISTED LIVING/ SENIOR CENTERS

Visit senior centers to discuss implants, dentures, snoring, and sleep apnea. Seniors love visitors, and this is a great time to let them know what services you offer. You can make a simple PowerPoint or keynote presentation to accompany

your visit. Remember to use large, readable fonts (size 55 or larger) along with bright, colorful pictures. We promote healthy living in our presentations, not the treatment. For example, I would not show the patient an implant; I would show a senior citizen eating an apple.

NO. 10. ARRANGE FOR YOU AND/OR YOUR HYGIENIST TO VISIT LOCAL SCHOOLS

This is a great opportunity to discuss brushing, flossing, and nutrition with kids in your community. The school nurses will help you arrange these visits. They love having visitors, especially if you bring goodies. If we can get the kids in the dental practice, then hopefully the parents will follow.

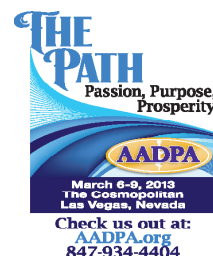
Bottom line: Go the extra mile for your patients. Do what others are not willing to do. Find ways to say YES to the needs and wants of patients. If you make your patients' best interests your top priority in every situation, you, too, can stand tall as the "white tree" in your forest of dental offices. **DE**



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