Strategies for Building Patient Relationships

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Continuing Education Units: 2 hours


Disclaimer: Participants must always be aware of the hazards of using limited knowledge in integrating new techniques or procedures into their practice. Only sound evidence-based dentistry should be used in patient therapy.

Note to State of Florida practitioners: This course does not meet the 3 credit hour minimum for Practice Management courses; therefore, it is only being offered for informational purposes in Florida.

P.T. Barnum coined the phrase "Without promotion something terrible happens – nothing!" This course will teach how to prevent "nothingness," how to promote a practice's name so that when patients think "dentistry," the practice name immediately comes to mind in a positive manner.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement
• Dr. Schwartz is a member of the dentalcare.com Advisory Board.

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Overview

It is said that “If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door.” But patients can’t beat a path to your door if they don’t know where to find your door. Similarly, P.T. Barnum, who promoted his circus with posters, fliers and media events, coined the phrase “Without promotion something terrible happens – nothing!” This course will teach how to prevent “nothingness.” How to cultivate patient relationships so when people think “dentist” (or a dental specialty), your practice name pops up immediately in a positive manner.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, the dental professional will recognize:

• The goals of a promotional program
• The roles of “name recognition” and “reputation enhancement”
• Strategies to promote name recognition
  • Naming a practice
  • Logo development
  • Business cards that attract attention
  • The role of patient brochures
  • Giveaways that actually promote
  • Signs that attract
  • How to use social media as an effective promotional tool
• Effective websites

Course Contents

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Introduction

It is said that “If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door.” But patients can’t beat a path to your door if they don’t know where to find your door.

P.T. Barnum, the “prince of promotions,” attracted people to his circus with attractions such as parades, sideshows and the midway. He lured customers with posters, fliers and media events. He coined the phrase, “Without promotion something terrible happens - nothing!”

Promoting and marketing your practice is more than taking out huge advertisements in the local newspaper or phone book. It’s certainly more than joining dental panels and advertising reduced fees. It’s more than directing potential patients to your website. Promoting and marketing your practice means building patient relationships by sharing the vision of your practice with people other than yourself. It’s getting others – your staff, the public and other dental professionals, to discover what you have to offer. It is to make others aware of how they will benefit by beating a path to your door. It means developing enhanced relationships with your social community, professionals and ultimately your patients.

Defining Promotion

The goal of any promotional program is to:

• Attract new patients, retain existing ones and recapture those who have gone elsewhere.
• Promote your practice name.
• Promote an image.
• Cultivate referrals.

There are two strategies involved in effectively promoting your practice: name recognition and reputation enhancement. Newspaper and telephone directory advertisements, billboards, fliers, business cards, your website and social media presence contribute to name recognition. You enhance your reputation by providing value to patients with quality service and relationship building.

Name Recognition

Naming Your Practice
The first step in developing name recognition is creating a name that is easily recognized and associated with your dental practice. Your mother may be thrilled with your name, especially since it begins with “Dr.” However, since “Dr.” prefaces every physician, dentist, podiatrist, veterinarian, psychologist and philosopher, naming your practice after you, does nothing to distinguish you from everyone else.

Your practice name announces who you are and what you stand for. It acts as a directory of services. Your practice name can jumpstart you to success. It can help you stand out or lump you with the rest of the crowd.

What makes your practice name a good name?
• When it’s easy to remember.
• When it’s simple to pronounce.
• When it presents an easy understanding of what you do.
• When it has a positive ring to it.
• When it specifies the type of patient you serve.
• When it describes the geographic area you serve.

For example, my name “Steven Schwartz, DDS” is pretty non-descriptive. While potential patients may recognize I am a dentist, they can’t recognize I am a pediatric dentist. If they drive past my sign, they may not remember the correct spelling of my name, i.e.; Schwarz, Shwarz, Shorts which will cause problems if they want to search for me on the internet.

My practice name is Staten Island Pediatric Dentistry. It’s easy to remember and say. It announces my specialty and precisely describes the category of patient (children) I welcome to my practice. It describes the geographic area I serve – the whole borough of Staten Island. Adopting the name Metro New York Pediatric Dentistry might give the impression to Staten Island residents that traveling to my office requires taking a ferry and train to New York City. At the same time, you don’t want to specify a very limited area. If your area has North, South, East, West designations including a more specific area may discourage patients to travel cross-town to your practice and seek a closer provider.

As a general dentist consider including the words Family or General Dentistry as part of your practice name. The goal of your practice name is to define, not excessively limit the scope of your patient population.

Logo Development
A logo is your practice’s fingerprint. It allows the public to easily identify you. It is not absolutely necessary to have a logo but it does increase your marketability – just ask the executives at Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola, Apple, McDonalds and Microsoft.

The advantages of a logo as a marketing tool are:
• It establishes practice name recognition.
• It adds to your image.
• It is an easy way to remind patients of what you do.
• It enables you to easily capture attention.

Your logo should go on every piece of marketing material you use. Besides your business cards, website, social media pages and stationary, it should appear on outdoor signs, promotional items, uniforms and correspondence. Your logo should be so identifiable with the practice, people can identify the practice without reading the name.

There are a variety of artistic choices for your logo. You can use pictures, caricatures, special fonts and designs of your business name. If you use a picture or symbol that does not contain your practice name, print the name in the vicinity of the logo so people make the connection.
Software is available to design your logo. However, it might be worthwhile to enlist the aid of an experienced graphic artist who can incorporate your vision and mission for your practice into your logo. Your logo is a very important part of your promotional program. Once you select a logo you do not want to change it, except for serious reasons.

**Print Media vs. Social Media**
While the growth of the internet and social media has brought huge changes to promotional marketing, one should not neglect the role of print marketing to enhance patient relationships. While print marketing limits the amount of information relayed to potential patients due to the confines of print, if it’s well designed and eye catching it attracts potential patients to the practice website.

**Business Cards**
Your business card provides people with their first impression of you. It conveys what you do and where you do it. It gives others an inkling of your personality and what you represent. Whether in a social or professional gathering, it is your most important networking tool. It provides people who meet you and want to have a relationship, with a means of remembering who you are and how to contact you (Figures 1 A&B).

The goal of your promotional program is to make you stand out from the crowd. Therefore, your business card should stand out from other business cards. You can do this by:
- Using color stock paper and/or color ink.
- Using plastic or Mylar stock.
- Making it a nonrectangular shape.
- Using a fold over.
- Being unique.
- Using both sides.

Your business card should contain the following information:
- Contact information: your logo, name, practice name, address, phone, fax, email, and website.
- Credentials, special degrees and advanced training.
- If available, a QR (Quick Response) code to direct patients to your website.
- Carry an ample supply of cards with you so they are readily available when you want to connect with potential patients and professionals.

A Quick Response (QR) code is a two-dimensional bar code that can be deciphered by a mobile phone camera with a code-reading app. When the QR code is scanned, the website’s address embedded in the image appears on the phone’s browser, eliminating the necessity of the phone’s owner to type in the address (Figure 2).

There are a number of websites which generate QR codes:
- http://www.pageqrcode.com
- http://www.the-qrcode-generator.com
- http://www.free-qr-code.net
- http://www.uQR.me

**Signs**
Signs should be designed with the intention of attracting attention. Therefore don’t just pick
the sign maker with the largest ad in the phone book or the first to pop up on a search engine. Your sign should convey a message that elicits an emotional response from the viewer. Drive around your community to find signs (especially for professional businesses) that catch your eye with their imaginative shapes and construction. You want your sign to have the similar effect on potential patients. Contact the person or company who designed and fabricated the sign to discuss the message you want to convey. Placement of your sign may be limited by practicalities such as available space, line of sight and permission from planning boards, but a competent sign designer can overcome these obstacles by producing signs that are easily read and remembered with large simple print and a striking color scheme. The sign should display the practice name, phone number, website address and QR code.

Promotional Giveaways
Your pediatric patients earn a trip to the toy box as a reward for good behavior, why not adults? Giveaways not only express appreciation, but when chosen and personalized appropriately can be a great means of advertising.

Think of the pens provided for patient use in the front desk area. How often do you replenish them? It’s not because they run out of ink but because patients unintentionally slip them into their pockets or pocketbooks. If your name and phone number are on them, instead of being a filched pen, it becomes an active promotional item.

The same is true of toothbrushes. If they’re given away without your practice name they are an oral hygiene aid. But if personalized, every time someone goes into your patients’ home bathrooms and sees them displayed in the toothbrush holder, the brushes become a promotion for your practice.

There are many types of giveaways ranging from pens to nail files to jar openers to magnets (Figure 3). To be effective promotional giveaways should meet four criteria:
• They should be affordable.
• Your practice name, contact information and website (space permitting) can be printed on the item.
• They are of practical use to the patient, i.e.; pens, flashlights, emory boards, oral health aids.
• They can be displayed so others will notice them.

A highly effective promotional giveaway is anything that sticks to a surface, i.e.; magnets, stickers, static stick-ons. They can provide useful dental health information to patients on such topics as oral hygiene instruction, emergency dental treatment and care of orthodontic appliances. When they are customized with the practice name, logo and contact information and displayed on refrigerators and bathroom mirrors in full view of family and visitors, they become great promotional tools.

Don’t limit the distribution of promotional giveaways to the office. Enclose them in new patient packets and dispense them at community programs (health fairs and schools).

Brochures and Websites
The amount of information you can fit on a business card is limited. Before the arrival of the internet and websites, a well-designed practice brochure gave potential patients a greater feel for the types of benefits you and your practice had to offer. It provided a more detailed description of you and your staff’s educational back ground, practice philosophy and information about the...
services your practice offers. It emphasized to patients how they will benefit by coming to your practice. How you could provide solutions to their problems and help them feel and look good.

With the arrival of the internet and websites, the confines of space in print materials, such as brochures were minimized. Print material still has a place in promoting your practice by directing potential patients to your internet presence.

**Brochures**

Brochures are used whenever you engage in promotional activities. Distribute them at any extra-office function in which you participate, i.e.; health fairs, lectures, community events. Include them in welcome packets to new patients and display them in the reception and business area.

When designing the brochure:

- Use a headline, graphic or photo to attract the reader.
- Include contact information, travel directions and map to the office and practice hours.
- Personalize the practice by including a group or individual photos.
- Make the brochure easy to read. Avoid using too much text. Use bulleted information and simple words.
- Have a call to action. Urge the patient to do something, i.e.; call for an appointment, refer a friend or log on to your website for more information. Include your QR code to direct patients to your website.

**Websites**

While the goal of a brochure is to inform a potential new patient, that you’ve already met, of your services and practice philosophy, the goal of a dental website is to engage potential new patients whom you have not met. It communicates your message in a way that motivates them to take a step to move closer to becoming your patient. This is accomplished with the development of an eye catching website and the use of social media to attract potential patients to your website.

As a dentist, you want your website to:

- Attract more patients.
- Serve your community.
- Provide dental education.

- Communicate your practice philosophy and culture.

A common question dentists ask themselves is whether they should design their practice website themselves or hire a professional website designer. It is strongly suggested hiring a professional website designer. If you think of how much training you’ve required to provide the best possible dentistry for your patients, you probably haven’t had the time to develop the expertise to design a professionally looking website. A website is a direct reflection of how people see you and your practice. It sets the tone for any further communications they may choose to have with you. Its design reflects your professionalism.

A well designed website should incorporate the following:

- It looks attractive and provides a positive reflection of the practice.
- It delivers a message that provides visitors with something they need or want.
- It asks visitors to take action. Request more information or make an appointment.
- It is easy to navigate so visitors can easily find what they want.
- It incorporates good Search Engine Optimization (SEO) so the website appears at the top of an internet search.

SEO is the science of optimizing a website’s content to increase traffic on search engines for top ranking results. Complicated algorithms are used to:

- Analyze website content for local search words used by potential patients within your community or town.
- Post links to internet directories.
- Post content to other sites.
- Post comments and relevant content on popular blogs.
- Aid in the writing and posting articles on article directories so links are syndicated across the web.
- Post content to get the website listed on Google map.

When writing content for the website, one must find the right balance between content that attracts patients and effective SEO. It must appeal to humans and search engines. The
content must be readable and easily interpreted by potential patients and simultaneously be read and indexed by search engines. Humans respond to complex websites with special effects and designs that search engines cannot index. Search engines highly rank content on simple pages with lots of text that turn off humans. The key to designing a productive website is finding the right balance between attractive content and effective search engine optimization.

When designing the website the following elements should be incorporated:

- **A domain name that is easy to remember**: Choosing a domain name should follow the same guidelines as choosing a practice name; describe what you do and where you are located. i.e.; http://www.monroefamilydentistry.com. For a more professional look your email address should include your domain name, i.e.; drjones@monroefamilydentistry.com is more professional than drjones@aol.com.

- **Google Map**: It provides patients step by step directions to your office.

- **Photos and virtual video tour of your office**: Personalize the website by introducing the professional and support staff with pictures and bios and a glimpse of an attractive office.

- **Appointment request form/contact form**: It provides patients the ability to request an online appointment or ask questions 24/7.

- **Review and referral forms**: Provides a means for patients to provide complimentary testimonials and refer others to your practice.

- **File downloads**: It allows patients to download forms (medical and dental history, HIPAA, etc) and recommended dental articles of interest before their appointment.

- **Educational videos**: It provides patients access to educational videos of procedures and advice on dental care to watch in the comfort of their home.

- **Before and after photos**: It helps patients evaluate your ability to meet their desires and needs.

- **Links to other related websites**: It provides links to other websites, services, educational resources and affiliated associations.

- **Skype**: It provides another means of communication between you and your patient through audio and video contact. For example, providing patients with the ability to contact the practice in emergency situations is a valuable tool in enhancing patient relationships. On occasions, when the practice is closed, patients with a dental emergency (pain, swellings, fractured teeth) can attach a picture of the problem to an email or text to the dentist on emergency call, enabling him/her to more accurately diagnose the problem and suggest treatment or referral.

- **PayPal**: It provides patients with a way of making payments through a secure system.

- **Easy to update**: The dentist doesn’t need advanced programming skills to edit the site and can easily update the content. The website should be updated frequently to continue to attract viewers with new information. The information reflects commonly asked questions by your patients or discussed on social media sites.

- **Incorporate keywords potential clients are using**: Use keywords in your content that potential patients in your area are using for search engine optimization. A competent web designer has the means to research this information.

- **The dentist owns the website and domain name**: Some website developers insist on owning the website and the domain name. This compromises the dentist’s ability of moving to another designer and necessitates procuring a new domain name and development of a new website.

Performing an internet search for professional website developers will yield thousands of results. As with many internet searches, you can’t believe everything you read. The most reliable way of finding a reputable and creative websites is to seek out existing dental practice websites, and contact the practices for web designer endorsements. Another alternative is after you have decided on a website design and budget is to sign up with a client/web designer matching website such as Elance (http://www.elance.com), Guru (http://www.guru.com) or 99 Designs (http://www.99designs.com). They will post the details for your website and your budget for free. Web designers, who are website members, will contact you with proposals and bids for designing your website. The likelihood is there will be a lot or replies so to narrow down your choices look for the following:
• More than 10 reviews with 5 stars.
• 95%+ feedback rating.
• Designers that actually respond to your website requirements rather than an automated message.
• A portfolio with multiple projects for multiple clients. If they cannot provide you with links to projects they have done, do not use that designer.

Once you choose a designer and agree on a fee, set up an escrow account for payment. Guru and Elance can provide this service. Escrow means the money you will pay for the service is held by an escrow company. This insures the designer will get paid and your money will not be released until you are satisfied with the provided services. Set up milestones and a payment schedule linked to those milestones. For example you can set up release of monies into three payments; 1/3 when the project is started, 1/3 when a certain milestone is reached, and 1/3 when the project is completed.

Typical costs for designing a website, which may include logo design, and blogs can range from $1,500 to $3,000.

Social Media
Social media is any platform that assists a group of people to communicate online. It is similar to communicating face to face with small groups of individuals with the potential of reaching millions of people. When used as a means to enhance or develop relationships with (potential) patients you don’t need the power of reaching out to millions, but rather reaching out to the local community. You want to concentrate on creating a presence with potential patients within 20 miles of your practice.

Social media is a two edged sword. One edge allows you to get your positive message about your practice out to potential patients quickly and inexpensively. The other edge is it allows patients to express positive and negative opinions about your practice to thousands of subscribers.

In 1987, Michael Lebeouf, PhD, wrote in his book How to Win Customers and Keep Them Forever, “A typical dissatisfied customer will tell eight to ten people about his problem, one in five will tell twenty. Seven out of ten complaining customers will do business with you again if you resolve the complaint in their favor. On average, a satisfied customer will tell five people about the problem and how it was satisfactorily resolved”.

As mentioned earlier, social media enables a disgruntled patient to tell thousands of people about a negative experience with your office. Fortunately it also enables the patient to inform thousands of people how it was successfully resolved.

Dr. Jason Lipscomb, in Social Media for Dentists 3.0 (http://www.socialmediadentist.com), provides examples of actual patient tweets about their dental experiences.

“Sitting in the dentist chair right now. Checking my tweets. Gotta love technology.”

“20 & still scared of the dentist! I sat in that chair numb and paralyzed with fear!”

“Standing outside the Dentist office, scared out of mind. Ahhhhh!!!!!!!”

“Oops missed my dentist appointment. Never called or texted to remind me.”

“Love that my dentist’s office calls to inform me when the appointment before me is running long. All doctors should be doing that.”

“I love how my dentist sends both a text & email appointment reminder. One click and BAM… confirmed! I’m still not happy a/b the drilling…”

“I love my dentist, he takes Lots of insurance.”

“I LOVE, LOVE, LOVE my dentist he is amazing. If you are in need of a dentist go to Dr. P_____ at the Dental Depot.”

“I love my dentist Dr. H_____. Compliments me on my teeth and a flower for being a good patient”

“Having a Dentist appointment @ 7:30am. My dentist Dr. F_____ is willing to see me outside his office hours. Awesome or what?”

“I’m sitting in the most beautiful dentist office ever! They have a movie theater room with pillows and stuff for kids! Soo cute!!”
“No one likes the dentist, especially when you don’t get seen until 20 minutes after your appointment time.”

“I might just kill myself. Been waiting in this damn dentist office for an hour.”

“This dentist is late. This is very unprofessional.”

“Aww. The dentist is running late so he came to apologize for running ten minutes late”.

“Wi-Fi at the dentist’s office :) whoooo hoooo.”

How do you follow what is being said about you and your practice in the community? You start by requesting all your patients provide you with their Twitter and Facebook names. This is facilitated by letting them know that coupons and special offers are available on your website available only to those who follow you on Twitter and Facebook. You monitor your patients’ tweets and anyone that mentions your Twitter name or practice by using Tweetdeck or Hootsuite. Facebook can notify you if you are tagged in a post.

When you receive a favorable review or tweet show your appreciation to the writer with a personal call or email. You can offer a token of appreciation, i.e.; power toothbrush, bleaching treatment or kit.

How do you minimize the effects of a bad review or complaint and turn it into a positive experience and post?

The first thing is to monitor your reviews. There are services that will do this for you (i.e.; http://www.google.com/alerts). This will enable you to thank those patients that write positive reviews and be alerted to those that write negative reviews.

If you receive a negative review, what you don’t do is respond to it online. This just generates more attention to the post and the ongoing conversation. The best thing to do is to reach out, personally by phone to the disgruntled patient and resolve the problem offline. Once the problem is successfully resolved ask the patient to write a positive post online describing the positive resolution.

For example:
Jean, a patient of Dr. Jones, twitters while in the waiting room that “she has been waiting for over 30 minutes and nobody from the staff has come out to inform her how much longer she will have to wait. Dr. Jones doesn’t give a damn about my time”. She does not complain to Dr. Jones regarding the wait once seated in the treatment room, however, she does not schedule another appointment when she leaves at the conclusion of treatment. Dr. Jones eventually has the opportunity to read the review. He could respond to it online and explain that the treatment he was rendering to the previous patient took longer than expected and he ran over the allotted time. This would lead to additional conversation as to why didn’t the staff come out to Jean to explain the situation and give her the option of waiting or rescheduling.

Instead, Dr. Jones contacts Jean by phone, explains the circumstances for the delay to her and apologizes for the staff’s lack of attention. In addition, he adds a token of atonement for the inconvenience and offers a free bleaching treatment and power toothbrush. Jean, satisfied with the resolution of the problem, now tweets: “Just got a call from Dr. Jones. He explained the delay and was sorry for not respecting my time. Gave me a free bleaching session and a power toothbrush. What a guy.”

Of course, the best way to deal with negative reviews is to garner many great reviews. One negative review among twenty great reviews actually humanizes your practice. The public realizes no one is perfect and occasionally there may be a slip up.

Social Media/Name Recognition
Using social media for name recognition will be discussed here. Its use in reputation enhancement will be discussed later. Using social media as a networking tool to build patient relationships is not much different than face to face networking.

Imagine relocating to a new city. How do you go about establishing new relationships?
• You rekindle former relationships residing in the area; relatives, schoolmates, former business associates
Where the use of social media become extremely useful is contacting potential patients. The question is how to do you find new contacts so you can begin building a presence in your local community.

There are several websites you can use to locate people on Twitter in your community (http://www.twellow.com, http://www.tweepsearch.com, http://www.tweetdeck.com). Once you are signed in you enter your city or town to find a list of members in that locale. You can’t follow everyone so pick 20 people to follow each day with similar interests and many followers. Once you select someone to follow, join in on a conversation. Don’t use your practice name or practice logo. Provide an interesting biography with a picture of you smiling. Do not bring up that you are a dentist or your practice in your first few tweets. Contribute something interesting, entertaining or educational. For example, if someone tweets they are looking for a great family restaurant or a weekend activity for their kids, you can tweet your experiences. Re-tweet other people’s posts to increase engagement. After three or four of your tweets attract the attention of others and you have been accepted by the group as a valued conversation contributor, establish yourself as someone who values health issues. Introduce an article on health, (not necessarily on dentistry) i.e.; the benefits of exercise in stress reduction. For your next tweet, take the time to write or post an article on your website that is relevant and topical for the group. For example if you are following a group made up of families and the holidays are approaching, post an article "Don’t Let Holiday Sweets Ruin Your Child’s Teeth" on your website and direct the group to it in a tweet. This should establish you as the group’s dental expert and the go to person for dental issues.

Unfortunately Facebook does not provide the option to browse member profiles by location. If you want to browse profiles that are publicly posted, you can type the name of the city and state along with the word “Facebook” into a search engine and find some results. You can also piggyback on your friends’ friends. Use your friends as a resource. Click on their Friends and choose the “See All” option to scroll through their list of friends. If their friends have listed their current city in their profile, they will appear in the search results.

You join groups with members that have similar interests as yourself; gyms, social organizations, volunteer groups, professional and religious organizations.

When you meet someone new, you start a conversation by talking about a mutual interest other than dentistry, unless the new acquaintance is also a dentist. You would not promote your practice at the initial contact. A social relationship is developed before pursuing the professional relationship. Social relationships are cultivated by providing entertainment, useful information and service.

A similar strategy is used when using social media to develop future relationships. When joining social media sites, your first contact with the site’s members is not promoting your practice. As stated before you cultivate social media relationships by providing entertainment, useful information and service.

Before engaging in a social media campaign, the practice website should be online because once you establish relationships, this is where you want to direct your (potential) patients to learn more about you and the practice. If you have not joined them yet, set up accounts on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook (ask any twelve year old how to do this). This is the means of how you contact current and potential patients.

Start collecting email addresses and other social media contact information (Twitter, Facebook). If you are not doing so yet, request this information from your current patients. Explain to them by providing this information, they will be able to receive important information from your practice, i.e.; appointment confirmation, financial account information, office closures due to inclement weather, educational information and special offers and promotions. Also it will enable patients to contact the practice 24/7 for cancellations, emergencies and general questions. You can invite them to view your website from their Facebook and Twitter accounts and write a “like” comment. Offer them an incentive, such as a bleaching or oral hygiene kit.

Emphasize to the patient the practice will not share their information with others.
Remember, developing social and professional relationships with a social media presence follows the same rules as developing a face to face social relationship. You have to establish value in your relationships, not only in creating name recognition for your practice but to enhance your reputation.

**Enhance Your Reputation**
There are ways you can enhance your reputation with potential and existing patients:

**Show off your expertise**
If you’re a dental school graduate you are an expert on oral health issues when compared to the general population. By sharing your expertise with the public you enhance your reputation and effectively promote your practice. There are numerous avenues through which you can exhibit your knowledge of dentistry.

**Present seminars**
There are loads of community organizations that are in need of speaker, i.e. fraternal lodges, school programs, religious organizations, community outreach programs. If they have monthly or bimonthly meetings, they need guest speakers. Presentations to the lay public can be very basic, covering topics ranging from dental health, new techniques, emergency care, to answering questions about dental conditions.

*(Suggestion: When someone asks you a question about a specific problem, give a very general answer and suggest they make an appointment to see you in the office)*.

Whenever you present a program, bring plenty of business cards, brochures, and promotional items customized with your practice and contact information. Wear a name tag with your name during the presentation and while mingling with the audience.

**Write an article or column for a local newspaper, magazine or blog**
A featured article on a specific topic in print media such as a local newspaper or magazine gives you instant name recognition and establishes you as an expert for thousands of local readers. A blog on dental health topics as part of your social media presence is even more effective. Use the same topics you present at your seminars for community groups: oral health, new techniques and specific dental problems. If you’re using a new technique or technology in your office, invite readers to your office to observe the technique or post a video on your website.

Do you have doubts about your writing ability? Record your oral presentations to groups and individual patients and transcribe them into written form. Or video your presentations and post them on your website and blog.

Unless you’re a professional writer don’t expect payment for writing. However, most newspapers and magazines will allow you to include a brief biography and a means for readers to contact you. This is a great reason for you to create a practice website and create a virtual practice brochure.

**Become a spokesperson for professional organizations**
National, state and specialty dental organizations sponsor programs to train dentists to be spokespersons for them. When the news media contact the professional organization for background information on dental topics the dental organization refers the media to their spokesperson. This is an effective way to appear on local news programs and newspapers and get your name in front of the public.

**Be nice to others**
People value nice people. Being in the presence of nice people makes others happy. Nice people are respected for their honesty, loyalty and willingness to serve others. The problem is you just can’t tell others how nice you or your staff is. You have to walk the talk. You have to demonstrate it both outside and inside your office through external and internal acts of niceness.

**External Acts of Niceness**
An external act of niceness is anything you do outside your office that demonstrates how nice you and your staff are. It involves volunteering your time, skills and financial resources for community projects and nonprofit organizations.
If you are new to your community, this along with writing and lecturing is the most efficient way to gain name recognition and reputation enhancement. Participation in these activities is not limited to you but should include your staff, especially if you've just opened a practice and your staff is sitting around looking at each other. Your participation should not be limited to use of your dental knowledge and skills. Your involvement as a member of the community is always appreciated. Types of activities your office can volunteer for are:

- Sponsor scholarship programs for students interested in entering the dental profession.
- Volunteer your resources to youth sports programs in the area of injury prevention. Activities include lecturing and writing on the use of mouth guards and supplying them for free. This is a great way to get families to come to your office.
- Volunteer your resources to shelters, food banks, hospitals, rescue squads, senior citizen and child care centers. You don’t have to limit your volunteerism to dental skills. Many organizations need individuals to help run their daily activities.
- Close the office for a day and volunteer your staff for Special Olympics or Habitat for Humanity type programs.
- Ask your staff for their input as to what they would like to do. Give them a few hours off during the week or month to volunteer for community activities.
- Ask them if their favorite charities have programs you can support.
- When volunteering outside the office, provide everyone with caps, shirts, jackets customized with your practice name and logo. It enhances the camaraderie among the staff, increases name recognition and reputation.

**Internal Acts of Kindness**

**Show Appreciation**

Everyone loves to be appreciated and thanked for a well done job. Appreciation and recognition are particularly rewarding when it is unexpected. Go out of your way to thank everyone that makes a positive contribution to the growth of the practice. Express appreciation to:

- Staff members who provide service beyond their job description.
- Professionals who refer patients to the practice
- Patients that refer their friends to the practice or just being great patients, i.e., arrive for their appointment as scheduled, pay their bills promptly, etc.

**Patient Appreciation**

Depending on the practice locale and patient base, how patient appreciation is expressed will vary. At the very least, patients should receive a personalized thank you note from the dentist expressing appreciation for referring a patient to the practice or as a follow-up call after undergoing difficult treatment.

For some practices discounted treatment is appropriate. Handle this by sending a personal note signed by the dentist and enclose a card to be presented by the patient at their next appointment, specifying a credit for a particular dollar amount. The card reads “As a token of our appreciation we ask that you present this Thank You card at your next visit to receive a discount of $(indicate dollar amount) toward your treatment”.

If you feel the monetary discounts are inappropriate for the practice, gifts may be used as tokens of appreciation. Gifts to consider are: flowers, balloons, restaurant and store gift certificates, picture frames and other knickknacks. Do not inscribe your practice name on the knickknacks.

A much appreciated token of appreciation is a contribution to the patient’s favorite charity. While the main intent is to thank the patient, a secondary benefit of giving charity is that members of the community recognize your charitable contributions and that you give back to the community. McDonalds utilizes this through its support of Ronald McDonald House, which provides housing for families of children undergoing medical treatment.

**Professional Appreciation**

As in the case of patient appreciation, a personalized thank you note is sent to professional referrers. The note should not only express thanks but also provide a report of the recommended treatment and its acceptance by the patient. This is especially true if you are a specialist and you are responding to a referral
sent to you by a general dentist. From a legal standpoint it is important for both the dentist and the specialist to be kept abreast of the patient's compliance with recommendations. Patients feel more comfortable when they feel that their dentist and the specialist are in contact with each other and both are looking after their welfare.

When sending gifts to professional referrers, avoid the one gift fits all mentality. Sending a selection of fruits or cookies shows no creativity. Personalize the gift to the referrer. Choose a gift that is geared to the referrer's interest or hobbies. Covert questioning of the referrer's staff or family can divulge that information. Magazines, books, CDs and DVDs on topics of interest to them or tickets to their favorite sporting event present an opportunity for you to stand out from the rest of the pack.

Besides recognizing the referring staff, recognize the referring staff. Often the dentist or physician does not make a formal referral to your practice but the patient casually seeks information from staff about professionals they heard good things about. You want your name to come to mind in that situation. Sending cookies, fruit baskets or lunch with a personally written note expressing your appreciation will increase your name recognition and reputation among the staff.

A popular token of appreciation is sponsoring a seminar. Inviting referrers and their staff to a half day or full day seminar with breakfast and lunch really shows your appreciation. Not only do attendees appreciate your expression of gratitude to them for supporting your practice but also the fact that you are providing them with something useful. Depending on the mix of the audience, presentation topics can range from clinical techniques, practice management, motivation and health.

Here are guidelines to follow when giving gifts to patients and professional referrers:

**DO**

- Give gifts year round, not just holidays. There is a greater appreciation for unexpected gifts.
- If at all possible deliver the gift in person.
- Include a written note.
- Keep lists of what you give to avoid repeats.

**DON'T**

- Send gifts of different value to individuals in the same office.
- Send food or flowers during the holidays when the office might be closed.
- Recycle gifts. If you get a gift you don’t care for, don’t pawn it off on someone else. They probably won’t care for it either or worse they might have already received the same unwanted gift from the original giver.

**Provide Superior Service**

Just going through the motions of providing superior service isn’t going to enhance your reputation. Patients must sense the dentist and staff really want to serve them. They must feel the practice appreciates the patients choosing them to satisfy their needs. In the earlier section on Social Media the quoted tweets reflects patients’ feelings about their dentists.

Here is a summary of patient expectations and how their management by the practice can enhance dentist/patient relationships:

- **The practice sees patients at their scheduled time.**
  Patients expect to be seated promptly. If there is a delay, patients are advised of the situation before or as soon as they arrive so they can adjust their schedule.

- **The practice works patients into the schedule promptly.**
  Patients in discomfort or who require emergency treatment do not want to wait days or weeks for an appointment. The practice can provide emergency time during the day or be willing to remain after regular hours to accommodate emergencies.

- **The doctor provides painless dentistry.**
  Patients fear pain whether real or anticipated. The dentist should be skilled in minimizing discomfort during local anesthesia administration and the dental procedures. For patients that are so anxious they express discomfort although symptoms of anesthesia are present, the dentist should empathize with them and utilize anxiety reduction treatments, i.e.; nitrous oxide anxiolysis or pharmacologic premedication.

- **The dentist is humane and caring.**
  Showing concern for the patient ranges from respecting the patient’s time by seating
them as scheduled, acknowledging a difficult procedure by contacting the patient after treatment to see how they are feeling or just spending the time to talk with them. Patients want to feel the practice considers them more than a commodity.

- The office presents itself as a clean and esthetic facility.
Patients rate the ambiance of the dental practice in a similar manner as how they rate restaurants. How they are greeted, seated and served and by the restaurant’s appearance. Torn seats, warn floors, peeling wallpaper and dirty bathrooms may be indicative of the cleanliness of a kitchen and of a sterilization area. While million dollar art adorning walls is unnecessary, office appearance enhances the patient’s office experience.

- Being informed about the cost of treatment and flexible treatment plans.
Besides real or anticipated pain, the patient’s greatest fear is not knowing if they can afford treatment. Patients need to be informed of the cost of treatment before treatment is initiated and then offered methods of paying for the treatment that takes their budget into consideration. Payment flexibility includes accepting credit cards, third party dental care payment programs, and accepting third party payments as partial payment.

Conclusion
Building patient relationships for a successful practice is a multifaceted endeavor. It involves getting your name in front of existing and potential patients. This is accomplished by using print and social media, and your personal involvement with your local community. It involves developing a reputation of someone who is knowledgeable, competent and caring. Each facet is of equal importance and the dental practitioner needs to find a balance between the various components for success.
Course Test Preview
To receive Continuing Education credit for this course, you must complete the online test. Please go to:

1. The goal of any promotional program is to ____________.
   a. attract new patients, retain existing one and recapture those who have gone elsewhere
   b. promote an image
   c. inform patients of discount fees
   d. A and B

2. What makes your practice name a good name?
   a. It is easy to remember.
   b. It presents an easy understanding of what you do.
   c. It describes the geographic area you serve.
   d. All of the above.

3. Your practice logo ________________.
   a. is an easy way to remind patients of what you do
   b. should take up 1/3 of a business card
   c. establishes practice name recognition
   d. A and C

4. Your logo should go on your ________________.
   a. business card
   b. signs
   c. uniforms
   d. All of the above.

5. Both sides of a business card may be used to convey information.
   a. True
   b. False

6. A QR code is a ________________.
   a. two dimensional bar code that can be deciphered by a mobile phone camera with a code
   reading app
   b. code used by insurance companies to process claims
   c. bar code used by dental supply companies to process orders
   d. None of the above.

7. A good way to choose a sign designer is to ________________.
   a. check the phone book for a company with the largest ad
   b. look around the community for signs that attract your attention and investigate who is the
   designer
   c. choose the first listing on a Google search
   d. All of the above.

8. To be effective, promotional giveaways should be ________________.
   a. affordable
   b. of practical use
   c. openly displayed
   d. All of the above.
9. When designing a practice brochure, ________________.
   a. squeeze in as much text
   b. use bold black print on white paper to attract attention
   c. include contact information, travel directions and a map
   d. All of the above.

10. A well designed website ________________.
    a. can be easily designed by anyone with basic computer skills
    b. asks visitors to take action
    c. should contain predominately visual images
    d. should contain predominately text

11. Search engine optimization ________________.
    a. is the science of optimizing a website’s content to increase traffic on search engines for top
       ranking results
    b. uses complicated algorithms to analyze website content
    c. posts content to other sites
    d. All of the above.

12. When writing content for a website, one must ________________.
    a. appeal to humans
    b. appeal to search engines
    c. appeal to both humans and search engines
    d. insert as much text as possible

13. When designing a website the following elements are incorporated:
    a. A domain name that is easy to remember.
    b. A Google map.
    c. Virtual video tours of your office.
    d. All of the above.

14. When performing an internet search for professional website developers, ________________.
    a. narrow your choice down to anyone with more 10 reviews with 3 stars
    b. look for a 95%+ feedback rating
    c. look for a portfolio with multiple projects with multiple clients
    d. B and C

15. The benefits of social media in promoting a dental practice is:
    a. It enables you to limit contacts to your local community.
    b. It enables you reach potential patients worldwide.
    c. It enables you to respond to disgruntled patients easily.
    d. B and C

16. When you receive a favorable review from a patient, ________________.
    a. immediately tweet it to all your contacts
    b. show your appreciation with a personal call or email
    c. don’t waste your time acknowledging it.
    d. A and C
17. **When you receive an unfavorable review from a patient,** _____________.
   a. respond immediately to it online
   b. contact the reviewer with a personal call
   c. send an email defending yourself to avoid a personal confrontation
   d. ignore it. Positive reviews will minimize the effects.

18. **When using social media as a networking tool,** _____________.
   a. on your first post, introduce yourself as a dentist immediately
   b. on your second post, direct your contacts to a recent article on your website
   c. contribute something interesting, entertaining or educational on a topic other than dentistry
   d. A and B

19. **An external act of kindness is** _____________.
   a. volunteering the resources of your office for community activities
   b. seating an elderly patient for their appointment ahead of a younger patient
   c. offering a gift certificate to a patient who refers new patients
   d. sending birthday cards to your patients

20. **Patients have a positive impression of a dentist who** _____________.
   a. respects their patients' time by seating them as scheduled
   b. acknowledges a difficult procedure by calling the patient after treatment
   c. empathizes with patients' fear of pain
   d. All of the above.
References
1. Lipscomb J, Knight, S; Social Media for Dentists 3.0, Social Media Dentist, LLC, Boston, MA 2012.

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