

# Sesame Communications: Less About Code, More About People

by Benjamin Lund, Editor, *Dentaltown Magazine*

*Dentaltown Magazine* sat down with Diana P. Friedman, CEO of Sesame Communications, who has a successful 20-year track record in the dental profession. Friedman tells us all about the company, what makes it tick and the ever-evolving research that goes into its products.

## First of all, tell us about the role you play at Sesame.

**Friedman:** My role at Sesame is to lead the company's strategic direction and its ongoing transformation into a high growth, cloud-based SaaS enterprise. Every day when I walk through the doors at Sesame, I am gratified to see us leveraging technology to connect the right patients with the right practices, while educating them about optimal dental care. The power of the solutions we offer to grow practices and dramatically impact their profitability is what makes our efforts worthwhile.

**If you were to meet a dentist in an elevator who didn't know about Sesame Communications and you only had a few floors to tell him/her about your company, how would you explain it to him/her?**

**Friedman:** Sesame helps dental practices like yours harness the power of the Internet to accelerate new patient acquisition, build patient loyalty and transform the patient experience.

Your patients live, work and play online. They use search engines and recommendations to find your practice. They want easy online access to care options, billing information, appointment reminders and treatment suggestions. They want an easy way to refer friends and share their great experiences on social networking sites. And they want to do all of this from tablets, smartphones and computers.

Dentistry is all about great relationships with your patients. Sesame solutions will help your practice deliver the same outstanding experience online that patients receive in your office, which in turn increases practice production and profitability.

## How and when did Sesame start?

**Friedman:** Sesame was started in 1999 by Dr. Brian Povolny, Frith Maier and Dr. Jerome Baruffi. Our first solution was the launch of automated appointment reminders for orthodontic practices. From day one, Sesame has based all of its decisions and innovations on the needs of dental and orthodontic practices.

## What is Sesame's corporate philosophy and how does your team adhere to it?

**Friedman:** The entire Sesame team wants practices to be delighted with the services and outcomes we deliver. This philosophy directs all of our strategic and operational corporate decisions. The company creates amazing software and outstanding services, but the true testament to our success is the long-term relationships we sustain with our members.

**There are a lot of companies in the dental market that focus on obtaining new patients for practices. How does Sesame effectively do this, and what does Sesame do that no other marketing company does?**

**Friedman:** There are plenty of organizations that provide components of the Sesame 24-7 Patient Engagement Management system. However, Sesame 24-7 is the only solution today that effectively helps dental practices manage every aspect of patient engagement. We understand the patient engagement lifecycle in its entirety and ensure we optimize the communications of the practice with prospective and existing patients throughout their interactions. Accelerating new patient acquisition is a very important part of this equation but it is only one



From left: Jon Engman, Chief Financial Officer; Tim Williams, Vice President of Product Strategy; Frank Fite, Chief Technical Officer; Chris Bethell, Vice President of Marketing; Diana P. Friedman, Chief Executive Officer; Jason Bernstein, Director of Service Delivery and Ryan Anderson, Vice President of Sales.

component. We also excel at helping practices create loyal and sustainable relationships with their patients. That is reflected in everything from the strategic partnerships we've developed to the range of solutions we provide. Our goal is to provide 360-degree coverage for the practice in its community – ensuring its brand is always consistent and visible.

In other words, we are in it for the long haul with our members. For every practice, we develop and implement a customized program designed to acquire and retain more patients. We help ensure patients accept treatment recommendations, schedule and show up for appointments, pay their bills, and continually refer friends to the practice. We have developed a resource library full of statistical research, useful tips, case studies, whitepapers and more to help practices stay abreast of new patient acquisition and patient loyalty and engagement trends.

Sesame is a research-based, data-driven company. This is why we also help our members identify the ROI on the services we offer, providing a comprehensive analytical dashboard with metrics such as website traffic, new patient calls, appointment confirmations, online payments and much more. Our research has shown practices using Dental Sesame experience (on average) nearly 23 percent fewer no-shows due to automated reminders. Members utilizing three Sesame solutions received an average of 21 self-identified new patient calls. These are just a few examples of proven success we see our members experiencing as result of our solutions. With thousands of practices leveraging our technology, we are gratified to see out-

standing results in the areas of practice effectiveness, efficiency and patient engagement.

#### Tell us about all of the options you can provide to dental practices that want to increase new patient numbers.

**Friedman:** In the digital age, prospective patients have different entry points to the practice. To this end Sesame provides a full complement of offerings within Sesame 24-7 to address those entry points. Sesame Web Design incorporates our Patient Appeal Rated research to ensure optimal presentation of design, content and navigation of their site, all specific to dentistry. In addition, Sesame now offers one website that automatically optimizes for virtually any device which obfuscates the need for



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a separate mobile website. The most important objective in the development of a practice website is to make certain once a visitor finds their website, they find the information they need to choose their practice.

In addition to websites, Sesame has a broad range of digital solutions created to help build new patient flow. Sesame SEO is a solution designed to drive new patient traffic by optimizing the ranking of the practice website and social channels on search engine results. Our solutions go beyond other SEO services by providing a multi-faceted strategic plan and ongoing optimization of its execution. Of members using the SEO service, 100 percent of them have at least one keyword ranking on the first page of search results. Sesame Social provides this same stellar level of service for a practice's social media channels by managing the practice's online blog, Facebook and other social media channels, to place the right content to drive the right new patients to the practice. We also provide Sesame Search Engine Marketing (pay per click) and Sesame Sweepstakes, all of which help practices drive new-patient flow across different entry points. Finally, one of the many core features of Dental Sesame, our patient and practice portal, is an easy-to-use referral mechanism for patients to refer friends and colleagues to the practice.

### **Are any dentists involved in the research and development of these marketing options?**

**Friedman:** Absolutely! Sesame uses both dentists and patients to create and evolve its solutions. Sesame is a research-based organization and has done numerous studies to better understand the evolving dental patient engagement management needs and online preferences. New solution releases also go through an extensive beta-testing period with a broad set of dental practices. Sesame only launches solutions that have been proven to drive the right ROI and practice results. Innovation is ineffective if it does not drive practice growth and profitability. Finally, we leverage patient-based research to help us create impactful solutions for the

dental practice. We believe that the needs and demands of patient engagement management within dentistry differ from many other small businesses and industries. Our solutions are designed and developed based on those unique requirements and needs.

### **What does Sesame do to help transform the patient experience at any given practice, and to, in turn, gain loyalty?**

**Friedman:** Building patient loyalty is vital to ensure the long-term profitability of a practice.

We help make the experience of being a dental patient in a practice as easy as possible. With Sesame, practices can connect with patients on a deeper level while respecting the demands for time and attention their patients already juggle.

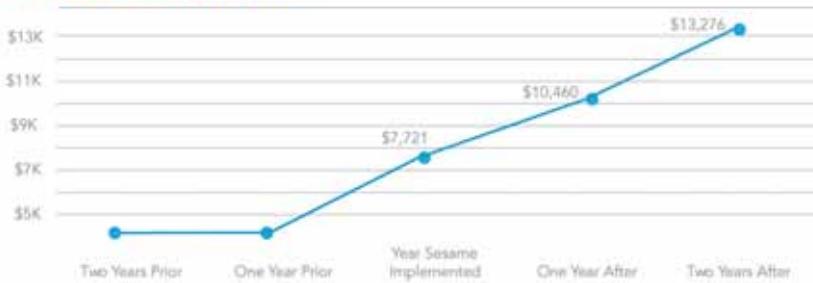
By building patient loyalty and transforming the patient experience, Dental Sesame helps practices build a devoted – and profitable – patient community.

### **What kind of customer service can dental practices expect when they work with Sesame?**

**Friedman:** Sesame is committed to an educational-based consultative sales process. An educated practice makes the best choices in services and is best able to leverage those to grow the practice. We certainly understand each and every practice is unique, and presents distinct challenges and opportunities for growth. We begin every new member interaction by listening to his/her unique practice characteristics and goals. It is imperative that we understand what the practice is trying to achieve – before we present them with a solution. There is no silver bullet in patient engagement – no one-size-fits-all solution. We understand this and try to customize solutions and delivery to the practice's specific profile and needs.

All Sesame practices have a dedicated account manager assigned to them. Where applicable, Sesame also provides quarterly performance reviews and strategic planning sessions with service area specialists to ensure their practices' ongoing success.

### **Reduced No-Shows Result in Increased Year-Over-Year Practice Production**



The average reduction in no-show rates per practice after one year of implementing Dental Sesame with automated reminders was as follows:

- Practices with no previous reminder system reduced no-shows by an average of 19.58%
- Practices replacing another reminder system reduced no-shows by 21.31% These significant changes in schedule compliance drove \$31,460 in incremental revenues for dental practices.

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## Tell us about the corporate culture at Sesame.

**Friedman:** The Sesame culture is vibrant, innovative and committed to long-term member success. We are located in downtown Seattle so the entrepreneurial spirit abounds within the company. The entire team is committed to helping others through our service to the community and members. Being in such an incredible hub of technological innovation allows us to benefit from the great talent this city offers.

## What does Sesame do to stay competitive and ahead in the dental profession?

**How do you obtain feedback from your clients and what do you do with that information? What interactions do you have with dentists on a daily basis?**

**Friedman:** In order to ensure we meet the ever-evolving requirements of dentistry, we take the time to constantly understand the nuances of the patient engagement lifecycle from the practice perspective. This is done through a variety of communication channels including phone conversations, practice visits, surveys, research and more. Each of these communication channels is used to better understand their challenges and needs so we can design and develop solutions to solve real-world problems and drive measurable results.

## How has Dentaltown impacted Sesame?

**Friedman:** Dentaltown provides a tremendous service to its readers. It is an educational resource for the dental profession, and is unique in maintaining an open channel for two-way communications among peers and industry leaders in the dental space. Dentaltown is a venue that has allowed Sesame to share its research and learning for the betterment of the industry. Dentaltown's ability to aggregate and share content across an expansive list of authors has had a positive impact on both Sesame and the entire dental profession.

## What are you most proud of at Sesame?

**Friedman:** The results we have generated for Sesame practice members. We have helped thousands of dentists build and maintain highly profitable practices year after year. Over the past three years, during the worst recession in recent history, we tripled the size of the company. This success has been driven by the results we are able to secure for our members. We can see the high volume of new patient calls. We see the production increases derived from schedule adherence. We see the loyal patient base that pay their bills online, refer others to the practice and maintain long-term profitable relationships. I am proud of the results and the outstanding Sesame team that supports them.

## Effect of Search Marketing on Call Volume

Percent increase in calls when a second and third Sesame solution is added



Lastly, as a CEO of a technology company, I am proud that we have not lost sight of the fact that our business is not about software and code, it is about relationships and people. That understanding is what will continue to sustain our success and growth.

## Why should a dental practice work with Sesame Communications?

**Friedman:** Sesame has a proven track record of success with practices and a long history of innovation and support specifically within the dental industry. We understand the unique needs of dentistry and invest heavily in ongoing research to both educate the dental community and shape the value of our solutions to drive the optimal ROI for our members. Sesame is the only company a dental practice can use to address every area of patient engagement management. This continuity ensures dental practices maintain a consistent digital brand, reduce the administration of dealing with multiple companies and have a cohesive way of measuring tangible ROI across all digital patient engagement mediums. If a dental practice wants to leverage the Internet to build sustained growth and profitability, then Sesame will be its solution of choice.

## What does Sesame have up its sleeves in the next year that you might be willing to share with our readers?

**Friedman:** We have a few new things coming out in the next three to six months that will be of great interest to your readers. While I can't go into specifics just yet, I can assure you they will all be tailored for the dental industry and focus specifically on new patient acquisition and increased patient loyalty – these new solutions and services will generate high production volumes and further ensure long-term practice profitability. Let me leave you with a hint – it will make your practice completely mobile. Stay tuned for more in the coming months and visit our exhibit booth at ADA annual session in New Orleans. ■