



Want to Compete With Big Business? Tap Into Your Relationships

by Leon Klempner, DDS

The reality of business is that corporate groups, affiliations, and conglomerates often replace small-business owners, and can do so efficiently.

We know that in theory, but it's much more prolific when it affects us on a personal level. The dental profession is beginning to suffer from this very issue, and it's manifesting in lower rates of patient acquisition and retention.

This downward trend is proportional to the rise of corporate entities in the dental industry—namely, dental service organizations (DSOs). If we are to stand up to our corporate counterparts, it will be critical for us to harness our strengths and leverage the communications tools at our disposal to attract new patients and retain current ones. To do this, we must first understand what draws patients to DSOs.

The diagnosis

DSOs promise low fees, flexible financing and convenient hours. They can afford to offer these benefits by reducing overhead, bargaining with insurance companies, and recruiting investors. They also have the resources to feature longer workweeks. The bottom line is that DSOs are effectively commoditizing dental-care services, and working to ensure that the patient's decision is about price and convenience, and not quality.

Admittedly, solo practitioners are at a disadvantage. A private practice cannot be expected to provide the breadth of services and low costs on par with a DSO. However, we do have a major advantage that changes the game. We have personal relationships with our patients, and most importantly, we have their trust.

The prognosis

There are two ways to deal with the challenge facing us. Either we choose to compete directly with DSOs for the fee-conscious patients, or we forge a new way forward.

To compete directly, we would continue to employ traditional tactics to drive new patients to our practices. Such tactics include enrolling in multiple third-party, low-fee insurance programs, advertising on the radio and in the Yellow Pages, and lowering our fees. This approach might attract more people, but they'll be people looking for the features that DSOs already offer. This not only puts us in direct competition, but also fuels the commoditization of our services.

Choosing to take ourselves out of the commodity game altogether means deciding not to compete on price or convenience. Rather, it means making our fees unquestionably worthwhile to existing and prospective patients alike. We can do this by using the highly powerful, almost ubiquitous tools already available to communicate the trust that exists between the doctor and patient, and to elevate our relationships in the process.

With this approach we target people who prioritize trust as well as quality services, and are willing to pay for those benefits.

The treatment

In this model, trust is the foundation on which our new go-to market strategy must be built. Then we must differentiate from DSOs by leveraging that trust, which has been cultivated through carefully built, long-lasting relationships. The key is to use that trust to retain your current patients,

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as well as attract new ones. To accomplish this, we can employ three primary marketing strategies: reputation management, social media marketing, and digital advertising.

Reputation management

Your online reputation is a result of what is said about you and your practice on the multiple review sites on the Internet. Market research into the effects of online reviews on people's decision-making shows that nine out of 10 people who read reviews decide whether to contact a business based on what they discover.

In addition, Google will reward your practice for positive reviews by featuring Google gold stars next to your profile in search results, and bolstering your website's search-engine optimization. As you garner more positive reviews, your online presence will be more visible and will begin to dominate searches made in your area.

On the other hand, it's no surprise that negative reviews are harmful. You've spent years building your reputation and you don't want a few comments to ruin it.

A simple approach is to ask your patients for reviews, but to be selective about whom you ask. If you hear a comment that you'd want online, ask for it to be posted online!

However, if you are still apprehensive about asking your patients for reviews for fear it will backfire, there is another way. Through my marketing consultancy, I've developed an efficient

and effective system with a virtual safety net that can be used to gather feedback in a private setting. It helps you to get more positive public reviews and limits the chance you'll get negative ones. It's called the SmartReview program, and it can be implemented on an iPad in your office.

The process is that doctors and staff ask patients throughout the day if they wouldn't mind providing feedback (not reviews!), so that you can make their experience even better. Then, patients rate the practice from one to five stars, and leave a comment on the iPad. Our staffers at People & Practice follow up with patients who left positive feedback, and encourage them to share their thoughts in a publicly searchable review on one of the key review sites, like Google Plus.

With this approach, you are vetting feedback and leading those with whom you have positive relationships to share their experience on a public platform. It

translates into third-party credibility that highlights the trust your patients have in you, which goes a long way to differentiate your practice from DSOs.

Social media marketing

People looking for a dentist will search online, not only to hear what people have to say but also to learn about your practice: its office culture, personality, activities and community involvement. They want to see how you relate to patients and how patients relate to you. It's instrumental in how they evaluate you.

That's where social media can come into play. Social media platforms provide a window into your practice. When you maintain your social profiles in a meaningful and authentic way, you essentially take the office experience online and begin to build confidence and trust with prospective patients.

For existing patients, social media allows you to connect with them when they aren't in your office (which is the majority of the time), effectively extending the relationship beyond office visits, which strengthens loyalty.

In both cases, it's a strong opportunity to persuade patients that you're a better alternative to a DSO and to your

competitors. They must be continually convinced that a private practice, and your practice in particular, is a good fit for them or their families.

Following are the steps for connecting with new and existing patients through social media:

First things first. Clean up duplicate pages and fix any information errors. Set up accounts on Google My Business, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn and YouTube. Create consistent visual, written and verbal branding among all your social media sites. Once you've done that, you are ready to try some of the following social media strategies.

- *Win them over.* Host contests and have patients enter on one of your social media sites. When they do, their friends and families see it, introducing them to your practice. It's a passive endorsement that helps establish an initial level of trust that translates into warm leads.
- *Repost and relate.* Provide posts that are relevant to your followers, who are members of the local community. What's going on in the area this weekend? Are schools putting on plays? Is the baseball team you sponsor having its final home game? These posts must

be unique to your practice and must entice current patients to like your practice, participate, and share the information they receive.

- *Take them behind the scenes.* Build trust by sharing what's happening in the office through photos of patients and staff. (As always, make sure you have written permission to post any patient photos.) Let them get to know your staff better by writing spotlight posts and celebrating work anniversaries and birthdays. Also, be sure to share information about you as a person. You're the doctor they're looking to learn more about, after all.

Digital advertising

For those of you who don't yet have people following your practice on social media, there are complementary ways to generate awareness and interest.

Facebook advertising, in particular, has emerged as an excellent, data-rich tool to generate awareness among targeted groups of people. More than 1.4 billion people use Facebook to connect with people and companies, and more than 900 million people visit the site every day.

Facebook grants you access to the demographic, geographic and behavioral information of these users so you can create campaigns geared toward a specific audience. This significantly affects the likelihood that you'll reach the people you want as new patients.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind when planning your digital advertising campaigns:

- *Show and tell.* This is a great opportunity to showcase the relationships you have with existing patients. For example, develop an ad that links to a patient testimonial in which the patient talks about how you've impacted his or her appearance, health, self-esteem or relationships.
- *Be helpful.* Don't simply post your logo. Try to share information that's valuable to people who are looking



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for a trustworthy dentist or specialist. You might post a tip sheet or checklist to your blog, and use the ad to promote it. You'll entice more people to click on your ad, drive people to your website and share more valuable information in the process.

- *Provide clarity.* Make sure you use images that are clear and evocative, and grab the eye. Posts with anecdotes or those that tell a story make you more relatable and help patients learn about your practice.

The beauty of Facebook advertising is that it provides detailed analytics about your advertisements, revealing their effectiveness and informing your overall social media strategy. For example, Facebook will tell you how many people clicked on an advertisement, whether they visited your website, and even what their interactions with your site were.

With all of these marketing strategies in play, you should always ask new patients how they found you when they

call for a consult or first appointment. This will help you link any increased new business to the work you're doing in terms of reputation management, social media and digital advertising.

The follow-up

Business is changing, dentistry is changing, and we too must change. In order to compete with DSOs, we will need to make sure that prospective patients understand the value that we provide.

The way to do this is by leveraging the trust you've already built with your patients, and ensuring your practice's online presence continues to build trust with prospective patients.

Strengthening your online reputation, connecting with current and prospective patients on the media they frequent, and targeting an ideal audience using all the tools at your disposal to reach them is the way to get there. In doing so, you'll be on steady footing as you move forward in this rapidly changing dental marketplace. ■

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Author Bio



Dr. Leon Klemptner is the founder and CEO of People & Practice (Pplpractice.com), a marketing consultancy that builds and manages the online reputations of dental practices. Through authentic positive reviews, a strong digital presence, credible content and engaging social media, Klemptner helps build loyalty among existing patients and attract new patients. Klemptner represents practices throughout the United States and Canada. He can be reached at leon@pplpractice.com or (347) 762-6330.

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