As a new group of dental hygiene graduates hit the streets in search of work, it’s fair to say many will find it much more difficult than anticipated. After all, the number of hygiene schools has increased by nearly 70 percent since 1995, to a total of 338. Contrast that with the relatively flat growth in dental schools (now 68), high unemployment and a rough economy and it’s a sure formula for disappointment.

My wife, Tracie Perry, a 2010 graduate of the Salt Lake Community College Dental Hygiene Program, was full of optimism as she entered the program two years before. She had heard tales of hygienists picking their own hours, being courted by desperate practices and receiving multiple offers, even before graduation. Maybe back in 1995... but not in 2010. And very little has changed since. Sure the economy appears to be rebounding a bit, but the market is still flooded with hygienists. Whether real or imaginary, the promise of hygienists being able to write their own ticket no longer exists.

It’s not all doom and gloom. In 2011, CNBC included den-
tal hygiene in its “Top 10 Jobs in America” list, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects 38 percent growth through 2018. But, today’s dental hygienists will have to be more creative and persistent to land the job of their dreams.

As reality was setting in for Tracie, she found few job openings and had no interviews after a few months. Eventually she did find a temporary position filling in for a hygienist on maternity leave. But it would end soon as the regular hygienist had plans to return to work. With very few job prospects, she became discouraged.

My marketing brain kept reviewing the problem over and over. What more could she possibly do? One night, unable to sleep, it came to me: “You’ve got to market Tracie the same way you would a new product or service.” With that, a whole flood of tools I had used over the years in my marketing and communications background flashed in front of me. Direct mail, Internet, video and advertising were things I had used for years to sell products or services, but never for people seeking jobs. But why not?

The next day, I quickly designed a postcard advertising Tracie as available for temporary or permanent openings. She loved it! So, we began assembling a distribution list with contact information for all the dentists within 10 miles of our home. To our surprise, we found over 100 practices.

By this point the wheels were really turning. I created a simple, free Web site for Tracie with all her basic information, including résumé details and a few pictures of her. Our 16-year-old son is a budding Steven Spielberg and I had a little bit of experience producing videos so we created a résumé video with an interview of Tracie. We uploaded it to YouTube and then embedded it on her Web site.

I made some last minute tweaks to the postcard, found a really inexpensive online printer and placed the order. Within a couple weeks the cards had arrived and we set a launch date. We addressed and stamped each one (using labels and a mail merge of the distribution list), then dropped them into the mail the next day. The total cost was just under $50, so we figured even just one temporary job would more than cover it.

A few days passed as we held our breath. By this point, I was certain they had all received the card but no calls were coming in. Then came a call from a dentist who was planning to advertise an opening. He said he was impressed with her and wanted to schedule an interview. The next day, we got another call and another interview with a different dentist who wanted her to fill in a few days and then he would consider her for a potential opening he was expecting in a few months.

As the weeks continued, more calls to temp and interview came. The interviews were tough. Our marketing efforts were impressive enough to get Tracie to that point, but with only a few months of temping experience, she was at a disadvantage.

Then one day a call came in from Millear Family Dental. The doctor had just finished watching Tracie’s video résumé and, like all the others before, was impressed. He too had a new job opening for just Tuesdays and he wanted to know if she would come in, work a day and consider staying if she liked it.

Finally, six months after graduation (but less than 60 days into our marketing campaign) she had a permanent job. And, not only a job, but a place where she is well-paid and loves working. The added bonus is that it is just a few minutes from our home.

Tracie always wanted to work two or three days a week, so the campaign continued until she found an additional day at another office just up the road from her other job. With the continued effort came more interviews and more temporary work. In fact, so much temporary work was offered, she had to decline many of them.

In total, we spent approximately $150 for printing and mailing three postcards to just over 100 dentists. From that, Tracie received three job offers, a couple dozen temping position offers and went on a dozen interviews. We also took advantage of free advertising opportunities we found on Facebook and Google. Interestingly, even though the marketing campaign is over, Tracie is still getting calls for temping positions from the original postcard mailing.

I’ve always believed that it’s important to share success, to help others who might be struggling as Tracie was. To do that I wrote a book, Landing a Great Dental Hygiene Job, that goes into all the strategies and tools we used to help Tracie find her dream job. The basic theme of advice we offer from the book to all hygienists is simple: be creative, be persistent, and most importantly, be different. We only ask that if you like it, share it with someone else.

Sure, the economy stinks, the market is flooded with hygienists and you can’t exactly write your own ticket in the current job market, but I am a firm believer that despite all that, anyone can land a great dental hygiene job.

Author’s Bio

Doug Perry has 18 years of marketing/communications experience working for membership associations and marketing firms in Utah. He holds a bachelor’s degree in communications/PR from Weber State University. A native of Oregon, he and his wife are the parents of four children and live just outside Salt Lake City. The book Landing a Great Dental Hygiene Job, is free and can be found online at http://www.facebook.com/LandingAGreatDentalHygieneJob.