



PRACTICE MANAGEMENT NOTES

A Supplement to the AAOMS Today Newsletter March/April 2006

Marketing for the OMS Practice: Developing a Plan to Consistently Attract Quality New Patients

By Gary Takacs

The world is changing at an ever quickening pace. Today, marketing is another field at which OMSs must excel to develop a thriving practice. The purpose of this issue of *PM Notes* is to share some marketing strategies and techniques that will allow your office to consistently attract quality new patients. The concepts presented in this article are drawn from my experiences coaching and consulting with some of the most successful OMS practices in the country.

Before I discuss specific techniques, I'd like to provide a context for the topic of OMS practice marketing. To do this, I'll step outside of the healthcare professions and provide an example from the world of higher education. The example I will use is how Harvard University uses marketing as part of their business plan.

Each year, Harvard University receives over 60,000 applications for admission to their undergraduate program. They accept about 4,000 new students annually, or one student out of every 15 applications. Now, this places Harvard University in the enviable position of being able to select the very best students from their applicant pool each year. Given this surplus of quality applications each year, you might think Harvard has no need to market. After all, they must turn away over 93% of the applications they receive. However, contrary to what you might think, Harvard has a significant marketing budget and spends a considerable sum on marketing each and every year. Why do they do this when they have such a surplus of applications?

The reason Harvard spends money on marketing is to maintain their position of attracting the best and brightest students. Marketing for Harvard is not a quantitative activity; rather it is a qualitative exercise.

They have developed a comprehensive marketing plan that includes visiting high school campuses throughout the country, a classy print advertising campaign, alumni recruiting activities and a host of other specific marketing initiatives that all prove very effective for them. They market not because they need more applicants, but to ensure that they always have the best applicants. Herein lies the lesson we can apply to marketing for an OMS practice.

Just as Harvard University views marketing as a qualitative exercise, so too should this be your objective in developing a comprehensive marketing plan for your OMS practice. The reason to market is not just to attract more new patients (though this may well be part of your objective), but to attract more of the kind of patients you would like to see in your practice. A well-designed and executed marketing plan will allow your office to influence the treatment mix, resulting in providing more of the care you would like to provide. Your objectives may include growing the implant component of your practice or growing the expanded scope services you provide. By developing a comprehensive marketing plan you will have a practice that evolves more by design than by accident.

Another reason to engage in practice marketing is to educate the public about good oral health. A good way to think of your marketing plan is as a public service campaign where you are educating the public about advances in oral and maxillofacial surgery. In my opinion, AAOMS does an excellent job with some of their public education campaigns. For example, AAOMS published an advertising supplement circulated in *USA Today* about the importance of good oral health and how an oral and maxillofacial surgeon can help patients

achieve better oral health. This advertising supplement is very well done and an excellent service to the public and the profession. Modeling your own marketing activities to include an educational component is an excellent strategy. My objective in providing these opening comments is to help you develop a positive perspective on practice marketing. Now let's discuss specific marketing strategies.

A comprehensive marketing plan for an OMS practice should include the following three elements:

- **Marketing to the Professional Community to Build a Strong Referral Base**
- **Marketing to the Public**
- **Creating a Practice Web site**

I'll discuss each of these elements in detail:

Marketing to the Professional Community to Build a Strong Referral Base

Building an excellent referral base should be a core component of your marketing plan. It is no longer enough to take a doctor out to lunch and expect to see referrals. In fact, I'll make a very bold statement: General dentists don't want to go out to lunch with you unless it is to discuss a specific case! Don't take it personally. It's just that they are so busy in their professional and personal lives that they do not have time for another lunch. Rather, I would encourage you to develop a consistent series of activities with the goal of maintaining your constant visibility with referral sources as well as potential referral sources.

One of the keys to developing a strong referral base is to make marketing a continuous exercise. Frequent contact is necessary to maintain top-of-mind status with your referral sources. Another important key is to recognize the role of referral doctor team members in the referral process. Many referrals occur because of support you get from the team members of your referral sources. Often the general dentist will make a referral recommendation, and as soon as the doctor leaves the room the patient says to the dental assistant, "I don't know, the doctor suggested I see an oral surgeon, what do you think?" The response that I want is something like, "You know, if the doctor suggested that you see an oral and maxillofacial surgeon you really should do that. The office our doctor has recommended is outstanding and you will be very well taken care of there!" The point I am making here is that you should not overlook the team members in your outreach efforts. Developing great relationships with the

team members of your referral sources can greatly enhance your efforts.

Below are five activities you may wish to consider in your marketing plan to build a strong referral base. I have chosen these five activities to illustrate the kind of referral base marketing worth considering and because each of these activities has proven effective with my client base.

- **Sponsor CPR training** —Your referral sources really appreciate CPR training since the need is universal and offices often procrastinate in getting this training.
- **Surprise staff of referral offices with treats of nominal value (pick non-traditional holidays)** — Picking non-traditional holidays brings a surprise factor. *To be in accordance with anti-kickback regulations, treats/gifts should not exceed \$10 per gift or \$50 per year.*
- **Sponsor CE courses** — This is a professional way of providing value to your referral sources and their team members. Your guests will learn a great deal, have a great time, and have you to thank for sponsoring the event. This is a win/win activity that has proven very effective.
- **Publish a clinical newsletter** — This can be a great way to educate your referral base on advances and topics in oral and maxillofacial surgery. This can be published traditionally in hard copy and mailed to your audience and/or posted electronically on your Web site.
- **Provide a pharmacy directory** — This is a simple project that is much-appreciated by your referral sources.

Marketing to the Public

The second element of your comprehensive marketing plan is to develop marketing activities directed to the public. Many patients who could benefit from your services do not have a relationship with a general dentist. In fact, the ADA tells us that even with all the increased interest in health, less than half of US adults visit the dentist on a regular basis. A marketing outreach program to the general public can be an excellent way to reach these people.

Two services that can be readily marketed to the general public are dental implants and wisdom teeth extraction. Dental implants are a great service to market to the public since there is significant consumer interest in

implants. People are interested in this topic and your marketing campaign can serve the very important function of providing education to help people make informed decisions. The same can be said of marketing wisdom teeth extraction. There remains a great deal of public ignorance about the benefits of wisdom teeth extraction and a properly designed marketing campaign on this topic can serve a vital educational objective.

An added benefit of marketing to the public is the opportunity for you to create referrals back to your best general dentists. We tend to think of the referral process as a one-way street where general dentists refer patients to a specialist. Well, the situation can work in reverse. Imagine the benefit of directing a new patient who is not under the care of a general dentist to one of your best referral sources. For example, you might see a new implant patient as a result of your marketing activities who is not under the care of a general dentist. You could become a hero to your referral source by directing this patient to his or her office to complete the restorative elements of the treatment plan. Believe me, that doctor will be thrilled to go to lunch with you to discuss this case!

Creating a Practice Web Site

Technology has advanced to the point where I believe it is absolutely imperative for your practice to have a state-of-the-art Web site. Patients today expect this of you. Your Web site can serve a variety of functions and is an excellent way for you to market your practice to your referral base as well as to the public. While your Web site might include many enhancements, at the very least it should include:

- Doctor biography
- Brief summary of practice philosophy
- Patient education modules
- Online patient registration
- Office contact information
- E-mail function for patients to ask questions
- Office map

Your Web site will become a 24/7 marketing tool that will provide exposure of your practice to the public, as well as to your referral community. As important as a Web site is today, it will become even more important in the future. If you have held off on adopting this technology, it is time to use the Internet as a tool to market your practice.

I hope this article has encouraged you to develop a comprehensive marketing plan. Think about practice marketing as a great way to educate people about how you can help them obtain better health. Consider including the three elements of marketing to the professional community to build a strong referral base, an outreach program to reach the public, and a state-of-the-art Web site as the core components of your comprehensive marketing plan. The end result will be a consistent flow of quality new patients to your practice.

Mr. Takacs is a nationally recognized authority on the business of oral and maxillofacial surgery. He will be a featured speaker at the 2006 AAOMS Annual Meeting in San Diego and can be reached in his office at 480/951-1652 or by e-mail at gary@garytakacs.com.

This is number 93 in a series of articles on practice management and marketing for oral and maxillofacial surgeons developed under the auspices of the Committee on Practice Management & Professional and Allied Staff (Brent T. Garrison, Chair, Robert W. Emery, John E. Feeney, Jerry L. Halpern, Rickey L. Hurst, Keith E. Krueger, Donald P. Lewis, Richard C. Robert, Robert T. Watts, Jr., Robert L. Coles, Consultant) and AAOMS staff. Complete sets of previously published *Practice Management Notes* are available online at aaoms.org.

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Your Speakers:

Stuart L. Graves, DDS, MS—Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon

Dr. Graves has published on implant dentistry and currently lectures both nationally and internationally on dental implants. Dr. Graves is past president of the Mid-Atlantic Society of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons, past president of the Implant Society of Northern Virginia, Diplomate of the American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, and active in the Academy of Osseointegration. He is currently on editorial staff of Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Implants. Dr. Graves maintains a private practice in Burke and Reston, Virginia, where over half of his practice is dedicated to implant dentistry. Last year he placed over 1200 implants.

Brian A. Mahler, DDS—Prosthodontist

Dr. Mahler has been in private practice in Fairfax, Virginia since 1979. His practice is limited to the specialty of prosthodontics. He graduated from the Medical College of Virginia, completed a general practice residency at Sinai Hospital of Baltimore, Maryland and he received his certificate in prosthodontics at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Mahler has lectured both nationally and internationally on implant dentistry. Approximately 70 percent of his practice involves the restoration of dental implants. He has consulted, taught and lectured for numerous implant companies over the years. Dr. Mahler is an active member of the American Dental Association, American College of Prosthodontics and the Academy of Osseointegration.

For more information, please visit the Practice Management pages of www.aaoms.org or call *Beth Hayson*, practice management staff associate, at 800/822-6637 ext. 4357.