

# The Benefits of Marketing in Orthodontics

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**Abstract.** *This article gives an outline of marketing basics and how they could be used to best effect in the Orthodontic profession.*

**Index Words:** Customer focus, Marketing plan, Promotion, Communications.

A thorough understanding of marketing as a business function has become a prerequisite for success of any business providing products or services to the consumer. But the principles used in marketing have also spread their tentacles outside the business arena and the practice is now successfully used by other organisations including charities and local government.

Orthodontists should not lag behind. Orthodontists need to emulate the success of other professionals and become more customer focused, with a firm grip on the tools enabling them to present their services most effectively.

## Marketing or selling?

The British public tends to have a low view of anything to do with sales and there is a popular misconception that marketing and sales are the same thing. The man on the street would probably define marketing as persuading people to buy something they do not want but this is not what marketing is about.

Marketing is about putting the customer first, identifying their needs and providing whatever is necessary to satisfy them—preferably at a profit. Whether an organisation provides products or services, it is essential that the need for this is identified first and the customer is given exactly what they want to satisfy the need. One example of a huge success in marketing terms is the invention of the *walkman*, a product which took over the world by storm.

## Marketing basics

As with all established business concepts, the marketing discipline abounds in terminology which means little to the uninitiated. The key marketing concepts have for many years been known as the 'four P's' and define the essential components of marketing. The four P's are:

- 1) *Product*—The product/service should fit the task that customers want it for, it should work, and it should be what the customers expect to get.
- 2) *Place*—The product/service should be available, where customers find it most convenient to obtain.
- 3) *Promotion*—Putting the message across about the benefits of the service/product in a way that is appropriate to customers.
- 4) *Price*—Setting the right price. The product should always be seen as representing good value. This does not mean the cheapest available; one of the main tenets

of marketing is that customers are usually prepared to pay a little more for something that really works for them as individuals.

Some of the questions posed by the application of these four Ps in the context of marketing for service providers such as orthodontists are simple to answer whilst others are more complex. For instance, the best place for providing the service would most likely be in an urban area as opposed to a remote area of the Scottish Highlands. At the same time, the services offered will depend on the greatest need of the customers whilst the development of the range of services and treatment options available will often be taken care of by those practitioners engaged in research and development of treatment methods. As to the cost, this will depend on the treatment used but the prices charged for the service will inevitably need to take into account that NHS funding for non-essential work is reduced, with more individuals having to pay for their treatment using personal resources.

## The marketing plan

These days, most organisations and professions are in a competitive market. The orthodontic profession is no different. Before considering marketing as either an organisation or an individual, a marketing plan should be developed.

To be able to assess the marketing needs effectively, it is advisable to carry out market research amongst both internal and external audiences to analyse the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats (SWOT analysis) the organisation is faced with.

This SWOT analysis would include information obtained by general research aimed at establishing the size of the market, the market share of an organisation/ practice and its position in comparison to its competitors. Then, in order to get a clearer idea of the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation, a simple survey amongst existing customers could be carried out. This could take the form of a brief questionnaire and ideally, this should be specifically targeted at the different groups of customers. Questions which are relevant to a patient are not necessarily relevant to a medical practitioner supplying referrals, but whatever the target group, the survey should be aimed at generating information about how customers rate the services provided, covering areas such as cost, availability and quality.

Once this research has been carried out, it will be much

easier to get a clear idea of what marketing activities are needed. On the basis of the results of the research and the SWOT analysis, it is possible to produce an outline marketing plan. The key elements of the plan would include:

- 1) Agreeing the overall business goal the organisation/practice wants to achieve.
- 2) Setting marketing objectives and strategy which will help achieve this goal.
- 3) Deciding on which marketing activities are likely to be most effective, i.e. advertising, direct mail, sponsorship, exhibitions, sales promotion and public relations.

The business goal to be achieved will depend on the opportunities, but it will in most cases be focused on growth as any business or organisation needs to grow in order to continue to exist. The marketing objective and strategy will be aimed at achieving growth.

Market growth can be achieved with one of the following four marketing strategies. An organisation could grow its share of the market by winning more customers (market development). Alternatively, tough competition from other practices fighting for a limited pool of customers may mean a practice needs to find ways of differentiating itself from its competitors and developing a distinct identity (differentiation). A third possibility is that an organisation could develop by extending the range of services it offers (extension). Lastly, diversification and development of services which take the organisation into new areas of business is another option (diversification).

### Promotion and Marketing Communications

Once the marketing strategy has been settled, the decision as to what marketing activities to undertake falls into place more easily. In the case of orthodontics, the greatest potential for marketing activities will be focused on the area of promotion or communication with the customers. In the orthodontic profession the customers or service users are varied and include potential and existing patients, the National Health Service, the referring professions, e.g. medical practitioners and dentists as well as Westminster and Whitehall.

For the success of all promotional activities, it is important to spread messages which are informative, interesting and relevant to the audiences. Marketing communications efforts aimed at potential new patients and promoting the service provided by orthodontists will therefore focus on the key range of benefits to the potential patient. General awareness of what is involved in orthodontics amongst the public in general is likely to be low and therefore it is important to keep the message clear and simple.

Those audiences with prior knowledge of the services offered need to be given information aimed at telling them about the latest developments in order to maintain their interest and strengthen their commitment as users of the services. Existing patients will be keen to know more about the treatment they are receiving in particular and this can be backed up with general information about services which might be relevant to people they know. Existing patients should be regarded as a source of referrals. At the same time, the referring professional will need

to be informed about what treatment methods are available and who they are relevant for. The information they are provided with will tend to be of a more complex and technical nature.

In addition to those customers using the service, there are other audiences who have an impact on the service, namely Westminster and Whitehall. The decision makers and opinion formers there are faced with huge demands being placed on the public purse and many different voices to listen and answer to. As individuals, they cannot be expected to know the full benefits and need for orthodontic treatment if these are not communicated to them.

If you consider marketing communications with this audience more closely you will realise how important this can be for the orthodontic profession. This audience can influence how many new orthodontists are trained by the provision of training opportunities, how many members of the general public can receive treatment by continuing to support offering orthodontic treatment via the NHS. In addition, they decide on the level of treatment a patient receives by deciding on the money being invested in the publicly owned infrastructure – equipment, buildings, etc. and they will also be involved with how well remunerated the profession will be for these services as the rates for treatment are set via the NHS.

### Marketing communications

The communication of these messages can be achieved by using some or all of the following routes, most appropriately to be restricted to *advertising*, *direct mail* and *public relations*.

The major benefit of *advertising* is that the messages can be controlled entirely by the advertiser as can the vehicle carrying the advertisement, which will be the most likely medium to reach the target audience. On the downside, advertising can be expensive and lacks the endorsement of a third party.

*Direct mail* is just like advertising in the sense of the message and presentation being equally controllable. The biggest benefit is that the message can be more precisely targeted at particular customer groups and the message can be more personalised with individual's names being used on an envelope or in a letter. Although it is a relatively expensive communications medium, direct mail has experienced phenomenal growth over the last few years due to its effectiveness in generating a response from the target audience.

The term *public relations* covers a range of different activities including event management, corporate hospitality, exhibition participation, sponsorship, brochures, newsletters and media relations. A public relations programme can be flexible, comprehensively or selectively using some or all of the possible activities, depending on the budget available.

### Conclusion

In order to develop opportunities, orthodontists will need to develop their relationship with customers and build a reputation for excellence. A planned marketing campaign

which is professionally carried out will help achieve this.

However, success will not come overnight. Practitioners in orthodontics who want to secure the future of their work need to be thinking in the long term. That said, with the changes in the NHS and the effect these have on orthodontists, it is now high time that practitioners take action in

the short-term and embrace marketing sooner rather than later.

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