

MANAGEMENT & MARKETING

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Orthodontists have attempted to modify patient behavior through positive reinforcement for decades. Rewards such as T-shirts, stickers, fast-food coupons, and movie passes have been used to recognize good oral hygiene, headgear and elastic wear, and on-time appointment keeping. If I were to do a survey on how many orthodontic offices have used a positive-reinforcement reward system, I imagine the percentage would be extremely high. If I then asked how many are still using their systems, my guess is the number would drop considerably. Yet some practices continue to have extraordinary success with such programs.

The scope of the reward system shared by Drs. Susan and David Hime this month is impressively broad. The Himes have been exceptionally creative in their marketing and in encouraging public service and education. Aside benefit for their young patients is a learning experience in making choices about spending. This program goes far beyond the traditional objective of improving compliance; it appears to be rewarding not only for the patients, but for the Himes' practice and even their community.

The Patient Incentive Program Grows Up

Patient incentive programs have been used for years to help improve patient cooperation during orthodontic treatment. Most of these programs offer a small token for a specific action such as good oral hygiene or having no loose brackets or bands. Patients can later exchange their tokens for small prizes.

We have developed a more extensive patient incentive program in our office that has become a centerpiece of our internal marketing. Not only does it improve clinical cooperation, but it offers benefits to the patient, the parents, the community, the schools, and the family dentists. It makes orthodontic treatment a little more fun while helping to teach responsibility and the concept of saving.

Hime Bucks

Our program is built around "Hime Bucks", which are similar in look and feel to real dollar bills (Fig. 1). We chose the name "Hime Bucks" so that our practice's name would be reinforced any time the program is discussed, either inside or outside the office. Whenever a patient tells a friend about our program, they cannot help but mention the name of our practice. Thus, the name "Hime Bucks" provides more marketing benefits than "Orthobucks" or "Wooden Nickels" would. The Hime Bucks also include our logo and a lighthearted photograph of the doctors (remember, this is a fun program!). The office phone number and address could be incorporated, although ours are not.

We give each new child or adolescent patient a Hime Buck Holder containing five Hime Bucks to get them involved in the program right from the beginning. The Hime Buck Holder is a cardboard envelope with a reproduction of a Hime Buck on one side (Fig. 2A), the rules of the program on the other side (Fig. 2B), and an introductory description on the flap of the envelope (Fig. 2C). It gives new patients all the information they need to begin participating, as well as another connection to our

practice and something to take home from the initial examination.

After their exams, new patients are shown the Hime Bucks prize board, which occupies an entire wall in the on-deck area, so they can begin to visualize the tangible rewards they can work toward (Fig. 3). There are several choices of prizes at each level. Level One prizes cost no more than \$3-5 and can provide patients with nearly immediate rewards. Although patients could theoretically redeem a Level One prize at each appointment, this has yet to occur in the more than three years of the program. Patients tend to save their Hime Bucks for more expensive prizes, which go all the way up to Level Eight (currently a Sony Playstation).

Level Eight prizes, worth 200 Hime Bucks, cost the practice \$100-120. To earn a Level Eight prize, a patient needs to have excellent appointments throughout a 24-month treatment period, save the Hime Bucks awarded during this time, and earn extra Hime Bucks through some "outside" work. Thus, all our patients know they have the opportunity to earn something highly desirable through their own efforts.

We keep a suggestion box in the on-deck area for patients to suggest prizes to be added to the board. We can add prizes as long as we maintain a balance in the number of prizes at each level. Prizes are also changed from time to time due to availability.

The Rules of the Game

Progress Reports are given to patients at each appointment to summarize their cooperation and to note the number of Hime Bucks earned for that particular visit (Fig. 4). The progress report is also a way to let the parents know they did not arrive on time for the appointment or missed their last appointment, and to inform the parents if the patient had a broken bracket or inadequate oral hygiene. Specific areas of poor hygiene and other information can be noted at the bottom of the report.

Patients can earn Hime Bucks in the following categories:

Orthodontic Cooperation

- One Hime Buck for arriving on time for the appointment. The patient signs in on a computer in the reception area, and we are strict about the time. If you make any exceptions, you will have to make exceptions for everyone.
- One Hime Buck for not missing the last appointment. We consider an appointment missed if it is canceled with less than 24 hours' notice. This is noted in the treatment chart by the business office staff so the clinical assistants can make the appropriate award at the next visit.
- One Hime Buck for having nothing loose or broken (bands, brackets, removable appliances, etc.)
- One Hime Buck for good oral hygiene. We consider hygiene adequate if there is minimal plaque around the appliances and the gingival tissues appear healthy. The teeth must be clean when the patient is called to the chair at the scheduled time. Each practice must decide for itself what level of hygiene is good enough to be rewarded.
- One Hime Buck for wearing a Hime & Hime T-shirt to the appointment. This is strictly a practice marketing strategy, since many of the patients will wear their T-shirts to school on appointment days.

Academic Achievement

- Five Hime Bucks for receiving all A's and B's on a report card. The report card must be brought to the appointment, and the grading period must have ended since the last appointment (in other words,

patients cannot save up report cards and bring a bunch of them in to one appointment).

- Five Hime Bucks for improving by at least one letter grade from the last grading period to the current period. This allows patients to earn academic Hime Bucks even if they are incapable of making all A's and B's. However, no Hime Bucks are awarded if any grade goes down by a full letter grade.

Community Involvement

- Five Hime Bucks for a community service project or charity work. The patient must bring in a short written summary of the project, noting who was helped. We keep the written reports in a notebook in the reception area for parents and other patients to read.

Referrals

- Five Hime Bucks for referring a friend to our office. Siblings are also rewarded for referring their brothers and sisters. We send a thank-you note with the five Hime Bucks after the referred patient's initial exam.
- Five Hime Bucks if a patient is seen outside the office wearing a Hime & Hime T-shirt by any of the doctors or staff.

Visiting the Family or Pediatric Dentist

- Ten Hime Bucks for bringing in a note or signed receipt from the general or pediatric dentist to verify a cleaning and checkup. Dentists appreciate our including this as part of our incentive program, and it also reinforces our instructions for patients to have regular checkups throughout their orthodontic treatment.

Other Rules

- Hime Bucks are awarded only at regularly scheduled appointments. Walk-in and emergency appointments do not qualify.
- Hime Bucks are the patient's responsibility. Just as with real money, if Hime Bucks are lost, they are gone for good.
- Once Hime Bucks are used to purchase a prize, they are spent (no returns), and the patient must begin saving again for other prizes.

Additional Features of the Program

Patients are allowed to donate some or all of their Hime Bucks to a charity box. We encourage these gifts from all patients, but especially from those who have extra Hime Bucks left over after buying prizes. The charity Hime Bucks are matched two-for-one by our practice and given to the charities of choice at the end of the year. We conduct an in-office vote every year to select the charity our patients most wanted to support, and have chosen Big Brothers Big Sisters of Austin for the past two years. In 1999, \$670 was donated in the name of our patients. Of course, all this information is displayed on bulletin boards in the office, so everyone knows what happens to the charity Hime Bucks donated by our Hime Buck Helpers.

We give out Hime Bucks to second graders who visit our office for field trips in October during National Orthodontic Health Month. We also send handwritten notes with Hime Bucks to new patients who stop thumbsucking after their initial visits. Hime Bucks are an easy, inexpensive way to

reward patients or prospective patients for any achievement or action that furthers their treatment or helps involve them in the practice.

Conclusion

The Hime Bucks program has been so successful that patients frequently come to their initial exams having already heard about it, and parents often call our office to ask about it. Like other incentive programs, it helps improve patient compliance with various aspects of orthodontic treatment. In addition, we include such untraditional areas as academic achievement and community service to encourage responsible citizenship from our patients. We also reinforce our marketing efforts by rewarding patients for wearing our practice T-shirts and for getting checkups from their general dentists.

Our Hime Bucks and Hime Buck Holders were designed by a graphic artist. A professional appearance of printed materials is essential to projecting a professional image of the practice in the community. Poorly designed printed materials could actually be counterproductive.

Any marketing strategy should increase the awareness of your practice in the community. The Hime Bucks program has done this and more for our practice. □

FIGURES

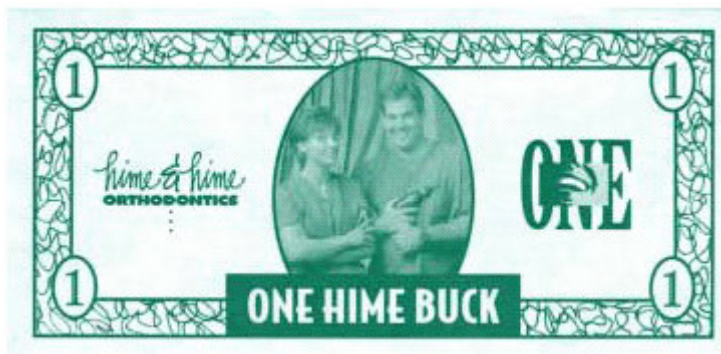


Fig. 1 One Hime Buck.



Fig. 2A Hime Buck holder cover.



Fig. 2B Hime Buck holder reverse pocket.

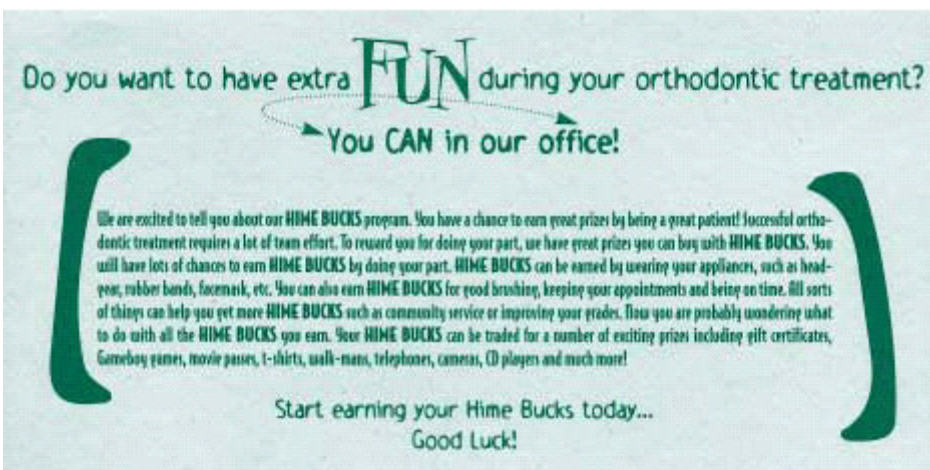


Fig. 2C Hime Buck holder envelope flap.



Fig. 3 Hime Bucks prize board in on-deck area.

Hime & Hime
ORTHODONTICS

PROGRESS REPORT

NAME: *SUSIE PATIENT*

Nothing loose or broken	1
Good oral hygiene	1
On time for appointment	1
Made last appointment	1
Wore Hime & Hime t-shirt	0
Extra: <i>Report Card</i>	5
TOTAL HIME BUCKS	9

ORAL HYGIENE

UPPER RIGHT	UPPER FRONT	UPPER LEFT
LOWER RIGHT	<u>LOWER FRONT</u>	LOWER LEFT

Plaque was found in areas marked.

NOTES: *There was a slight amount of plaque on the lower front teeth*

Examiner Initials: *EA*

Fig. 4 Hime Bucks Progress Report.

FOOTNOTES

1 Holy Moly Design Studios, 33 Forest Mesa, Round Rock, TX 78664.

