

Marketing the Specialty Practice

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There have been many articles written espousing the strategy of marketing a specialty periodontal practice to the staff of the referring generalists. It is not a new concept. The thinking behind this is that in many cases, the hygienist at the generalist's office may spend more time with a prospective specialty patient than the general dentist. And while the generalist, in an effort to be politically correct, might recommend two or three specialists for a patient to choose from, many patients will ask the hygienist or perhaps another staff member for a specific recommendation. Who would they recommend? Hopefully, it will be your office. So it is very important to keep both your name and your face in front of these staff. By making monthly in person deliveries of fresh donuts, cookies, and candies, tickets to sporting or cultural events, or perhaps specialty sponsored continuing education programs – anything to show these staff members that you are thinking about them – you are letting them know that they are special. At the same time, you are reinforcing the possibility that when a referral is to be made, your office will be at the top of the list for consideration.

I believe that this type of marketing only works well for offices with whom you already have a strong referring relationship. It continually solidifies your image and your position in the referring structure. This first tier level of practices, however, usually only represents about 20% of the doctors who refer to you. And even though these doctors probably send you 80% of your cases, they still are a relatively small group. I would like to describe the mechanics of an idea to enlarge that group – a way to get more offices to be at that first tier level. This idea is centered around a party hosted by your office. Here are the details:

1. The party should be held in the Spring or Fall in order to eliminate the possibility of severe winter weather and the heavy vacation schedules of the summer months. While this party is obviously being hosted by you for social purposes leading to new business, it needs to have a specific advertised topic that should be mentioned in the invitation. Examples might be to introduce or demonstrate something new or high tech like a laser or perhaps state of the art voice activated periodontal charting software. It could be very effective to have something non-dental. You might have a psychologist colleague who could deliver a humorous half-hour presentation on personality types. Title – "We all know many of our patients are crazy – let's find out why!" You might have a connection with a well - known local personality in sports, TV or theatre who could entertain your guests.
2. It is neither wise nor practical to schedule the party around Christmas or Thanksgiving. That is when everybody and his uncle has a party, so there is the distinct possibility of competition or a conflict.
3. Identify five to seven practices that are second tier who have the potential to be first tier. These second tier practices are offices that currently refer patients to you - they just don't refer enough patients to you. You like the doctor personally, and he or she is clinically

sound or has the potential to be. But for some reason, these offices have never been the referral source you hoped they would be.

4. Before you decide on a date, survey the targeted offices as to the best day of the week for both doctor and especially staff to attend your party. Your goal is to attract as many staff from these practices as possible, so you have to be sensitive to childcare issues or job requirements. These targeted offices should be made aware that you are arranging a date around their attendance. You need a very friendly, outgoing, upbeat staff person from your office to be making the calls and to convey the desired message
5. Once the date has been set, send invitations to these targeted offices as well as to your first tier group. You certainly don't want to exclude the first tier, because it is always fun and easy to interact with them. Just remember that the focus of the party is on making new friends and new connections
6. A catered buffet type meal from 6 to 8 PM works best, along with coffee, cold drinks, beer and wine. It is absolutely essential to hire a caterer so that staff and doctor have no responsibilities other than to be perfect, entertaining hosts.
7. Prepare a nametag for each visiting staff member that also includes their job description (hygienist, assistant, scheduling coordinator, financial coordinator) and the name of the doctor for whom they work. These tags should be typewritten for neatness and a more professional look. Assign one or two of your staff members to be the official greeters as everyone descends on your office. A handshake and a very warm hello goes a long way towards making the new arrivals feel welcome and comfortable.
8. At the party, it is the responsibility of each of your staff members to engage visiting staff members in dialogue – professional or social. Approach this as a job. You all have a specific task. Mingle – circulate – be a host or a hostess. Share what you do – find out what they do. Look for opportunities to introduce new people that you have met to one another. Be careful not to let any one person totally monopolize your time.

This party is a one and a half to two hour opportunity to connect and bond. You want your visitors to have a great time, and to be totally impressed with how concerned you are that in fact they are having a great time. If you are this attentive to them, it is reasonable for them to assume that you will treat their patients in the same caring manner. Put a face and a personality to each nametag. And as soon as the party is over, before you have the opportunity to forget, write down your thoughts and specific impressions about the new staff members that you met.

9. A few days after the party have a staff meeting to assess the connections that were made. Short, hand written notes should be sent from staff to staff, doctor to doctor. And within two to three weeks, where geographically possible, staff members should set up a follow up lunch date to build on the relationships formed at the party. Hopefully, your staff will have really connected with many of the targeted offices, and the mission will have been accomplished.

At this point the doctor needs to aggressively pursue the progress that he or she made at the party. Invite the potential referring doctor to lunch, or perhaps to be your guest at a professional day (implant seminar, etc.), or maybe a round of golf. And best of all, you might want to follow up these actions with a patient referral from your office. The doctor cannot afford to be shy or reticent. The message to be communicated is NOT that you want more referrals, but that you can

help the referring doctor to achieve better cases. You have decided that you want to work with fewer practices that are clinically excellent. You and your office are user friendly, provide state of the art therapy, and fabulous customer service. You would like the opportunity to demonstrate this level of care.

With careful attention to the smallest of details, an office party can be the catalyst for creating new and profitable professional relationships.