

MARKETING DENTAL SERVICES

Risto Tuominen, DDS, MPH, PhD
 Department of Public Health
 University of Helsinki
 Kuopio

Marketing is an essential part of any organization which services the public, whether it is a non-profit community organization or a profit-making private business. People often tend to think of marketing only as advertisements. However, marketing is much more and should be understood as a much wider concept. In today's management training marketing is understood as social and management actions, where needs and demands are satisfied by creating and changing goods and values. At the time of writing this article dentists are not allowed to advertise their services in Tanzania. However, you are allowed to market your services.

Dentists all over Tanzania are using marketing in their work daily. When we tell our patients that brushing daily is good for our oral health, we are actually marketing the idea of regular oral health hygiene. All health education work is nothing else than marketing values. The methods and ideas are exactly the same when a profit making private practice is marketing its services. The only difference is that health education is marketing an intangible value and private practice an actual service.

WHO BENEFITS FROM MARKETING?

Marketing can be looked at from either society's, the organization's or the public's point of view. The products produced in a society should be available for the public at the right place and at the right time. How do people know where the goods and services are if they are not told about them? This distribution of information is nothing more or less than marketing. The task of society is to inform people and when it is successfully done society functions properly.

The organization could be either a community dental clinic or a private practice. Its task is to serve the people. The organization cannot serve people if people do not know where the services are and how they can be used.

From the public's point of view marketing can be seen as a beneficial information flow. We all have limited resources of time and money, and we have to make choices how we use these scarce resources. Without proper information of the availability and accessibility of goods and services we would end up spending all our time looking for them. When organizations succeed in their marketing we know about them and we can more easily make our choices and go directly to the right place and obtain the goods or services.

This does not mean to say that marketing and particularly advertising is always good and beneficial. Advertising is far too often misleading and both ethically and morally unjustified. However, we should not judge the whole principle of marketing by looking only at the improper advertisements.

CORNERSTONES OF MARKETING THINKING

Once we agree that our resources are scarce, it is clear that all marketing efforts should be well planned and targeted. The first cornerstone of modern marketing thinking is **targeted marketing**. We need to know to whom we are producing our services. In any community we cannot hope to serve all subjects. In order to maximize our marketing efforts we need to determine who is our first priority target audience. We can expect most of our patients to come from this segment of the population. The population segment can be, for example, the population in a certain geographical area, or it may be the elderly, or in a busy city centre it may be the population working in nearby offices.

In most target audiences we can further find subgroups, some of which are more important sources of patients than others. In this way we can usually fairly and easily define the most important subgroup, the second most important, and so on. When such definitions are made, our marketing efforts should also be

directed according to this division. As a consequence we have more opportunities to make the best of our marketing investments.

When creating the segments of our potential patient sources. These segments should be clearly defined. Each segment should be clearly different from other subgroups. If there is a considerable amount of overlapping in our population segment characteristics, we cannot target our messages properly. What works well in younger age cohorts, may not work at all among the elderly. Once we have succeeded in this we can direct our marketing to precisely the right groups.

The second cornerstone is **knowledge of customers' needs**. It is old fashioned thinking that we are here to produce something called dental services and then needy persons come to us for help. This approach was typical of marketing thinking in the 1940's and 1950's. During this period factories and firms produced what they decided to manufacture and then it was the consumer's decision to purchase or not. This type of approach was still common in Tanzania in the late 1980's during the time of the planned centralized economy. In dental care it has been much too common everywhere, but gradually also in dentistry the producers, dentists, have started to apply more modern approaches.

1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Production Approach	Sales Approach	Demand Approach	Consumer Approach	Comprehensive Approach		

FIGURE 1. Development of marketing thinking over the last 50 years

In general marketing, the sales approach followed on from the production sales approach. During this period companies were very active in sales activities. Salesmen regularly visited potential customers. In the 1960's the marketers shifted more to creating demand. At that time it was common to create needs for people. New products were introduced as revolutionary and necessary goods for every modern household, etc. Only as late as the 1980's did consumers' own needs come to play a major role. This consumer approach is based on the knowledge of the potential customers' needs. It is worth spending time and money to find out what sort of services potential consumers want. Once one knows the kind of services potential clients want and particularly how these services should be provided, one can then produce them accordingly. One is also able to inform the market according to their wishes, which, of course, raises people's interest.

It is clear, therefore, from what has been said above, that I would wish to challenge the opinions presented during my workshops in Dar es Salaam that Tanzanians only need basic dental treatment. As long as we do not tell people what is really available, we should not say that they cannot demand any more than basic services.

The third cornerstone of modern marketing is said to be **good coordination of marketing**. At the very beginning of planning, opportunities are carefully studied. After one has a clear picture of opportunities, possibilities are then examined. There may well be great opportunities in the markets, but the reality is that your possibilities, like shortage of resources, do not allow the necessary steps. Often great opportunities involve great risks, and the money required may be too much to justify the investment.

However, if the opportunities are considered good enough, even when taking the risks into account and the means seem sufficient to achieve your goals, then proceed, but with good planning and coordination. Coordinated marketing starts with **internal**

Continuing Education

marketing. This is the motivation, training and continuous process of developing your business ideas with all those who are working with you. Internal marketing is properly done when all employees and associates fully understand your business idea. All too often it is only the entrepreneur who knows the long term and short term strategies and goals of the firm. It should be remembered that even a very small business like dentistry involves several people. The minimum requirement is an assistant, but in many cases it also involves cooperating with other dentists, a receptionist, and a number of other people. Marketing to a large audience will proceed better if one first ensures that internal marketing functions well. Internal marketing is not just a step to be taken, it is a continuous process where everyone involved understands the company's goals and is fully committed.

PRIVATE DENTISTRY IS A BUSINESS

In order to have a business which runs well and which will have future potential four basic elements should be kept in mind as shown in figure 2.

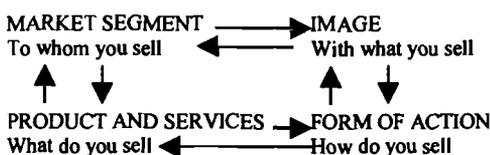


FIGURE 2. Basic elements of a successful business idea

It is necessary to work with and study your potential clients beforehand. Define the characteristics of the best subgroup of people you want to serve. Address most of your marketing efforts to this group. Create an image for yourself and your business. As mentioned in the previous paper, the primary evidence of your image is your logo, stationery, business card etc. Thinking and planning should go into your image, the picture by which you sell yourself and your business products. Professional help to study and create your image is strongly recommended.

Your products and services should be those your target audience feels a need for, and your image should be in keeping with your products and services. The whole selling process should be in line with your image and all sales efforts should be adjusted to suit the services themselves and the target audience.

Marketing a clinic providing mainly emergency services should have completely different promotion material than a clinic aiming at more restorative service mix. These two types of clinics are marketed more successfully if they have suitable images for their main service items. And they clearly have different target audiences.

The point I have made may seem self-evident, but the chances to make errors are so numerous that fatal mistakes can often occur, all mistakes cost money. A marketing effort which does not bring in a good number of new patients and reinforce the visiting pattern of earlier patients is wasted money. Private dental practice is a business, and a business is run to bring in income. This can best be created by good planning and coordination of all actions. Marketing is one of them.