

# high-tech marketing strategies

Use computers, digital cameras, digital images, e-mail, the Internet, and other high-tech tools to market your practice cost effectively.

By Dr. Larry Emmott



DR. LARRY EMMOTT

**H**igh-tech marketing using computer technology can create amazing, cost-effective results. “But, wait a minute!” you say. “I’m a professional; I don’t ‘market.’”

Even if you don’t think this way, you probably know some dentists who are uncomfortable with marketing. They relate marketing mostly to advertising and see it as unprofessional; they don’t want anything to do with marketing.

Every dentist and every dental practice markets, though, even if they don’t mean or want to. Marketing isn’t just advertising. It’s all that you do in your office that influences a patient. This includes everything from the color of the smocks, to the smile on an assistant’s face, to being on time. Everything you do, including how you use technology, creates a marketing message for your patients. You cannot *not* market.

Like it or not, since you are marketing, the question you need to be asking yourself is “How well can I market?” Using computer technology—computer software, digital cameras, digital images, e-mail, the Internet, databases, and other high-tech tools—can help you market effectively and save you money. Here’s a look at six high-tech marketing strategies:

## 1. It’s all about image

The old (Canon) camera commercials told us, “Image is everything.” That’s a bit over the edge. Image isn’t everything. Yet, it is an important practice element—although it’s an element many dentists never even think about. Even if you don’t think about your image, you do have one. Furthermore, you have a choice: You can choose either the image you want and promote it, or you can let your image happen by accident and be determined by others.

Many things—including office furnishings, the style of your business card, and even how you answer the phone—will determine your office image.

Using technology is mostly a business management function, but it will also play a part in creating your image.

An office with treatment-room computers, flat-panel monitors, computerized records, digital photos, and digital x-rays presents a high-tech, modern, up-to-date image. Patients will assume the dentistry done in that high-tech office is modern as well.

Just having and using computers is a marketing strategy. Compare that image to an office without computers and computerized records. Many patients would perceive that office as being outdated. They also might assume that the dentistry performed in that office is old-fashioned and outdated as well.

## 2. Top tool: digital cameras

The most powerful marketing tool a dentist can use is a camera. Of course, cameras aren’t new, but new digital technology allows us to use them much more effectively than in the past.

Digital cameras first came to dentistry for use with cosmetic-imaging programs. As digital cameras have improved, and as we have gained experience with them, we have found many more uses for digital images, including high-tech marketing (see “6 uses for digital cameras in the dental office” on page 48).

**How to acquire a digital image.** There are essentially two ways to acquire a digital image in the dental office, as follows:

1. One method is to capture a video image from an intraoral camera and convert it into a digital format. Most commonly, this is done with a video-capture card combined with image-management software. The most sophisticated image-management programs actually make an image part of a patient’s digital record.

2. A second method of acquisition is to use a digital camera. These cameras work much like conventional 35mm-film cameras, and they can be used with retractors and mirrors as in traditional dental photography.

Either way, there are many creative ways to use

- 1 Create a high-tech image.** An office with treatment-room computers, flat-panel monitors, computerized records, and digital photos and x-rays looks modern and up-to-date.
- 2 Buy a digital camera.** Digital cameras are a WOW factor, and digital images can be used for marketing efforts such as displaying patient photos in albums, brochures, and wall portraits.
- 3 Use e-mail for patient communications.** E-mails are especially helpful for sending recall notices.
- 4 Let multimedia education programs help educate your patients.** Multimedia presentations combine sound, animation, video, and computer technology.
- 5 Let the Internet do patient financing.** Introduce patients to Web-based patient-financing companies.
- 6 Use database marketing to target specific types of patients.** Use the patient data you have accumulated in your computer to do database marketing.

cameras in marketing. Here’s what Dr. Ron Jackson of Middleburg, Va., does. He takes a “before” photo showing an old black and failing alloy; he then takes an “after” photo showing a new tooth-colored restoration. He then prints these photos side by side and sends them in a nice folder to the patient the day after treatment is completed.

## 3. E-mail/e-call

Technology is continuing to revolutionize communications. In the dental office, we have many new ways to communicate with patients more effectively using our computers, including database marketing and e-mail.

Database marketing combines the data we routinely collect about our patients with sophisticated word processing. (See “No. 6. Database marketing,” in the text that follows).

E-mail is another new communication tool that is rapidly becoming the standard. Soon, we will be using e-mail and other e-communications to take the place of virtually all of our current paper correspondence. One great example of this is converting our paper patient recall system into an electronic e-call system.

**How e-calls work.** Ideally, an e-call system should work like this:

*Continued on page 48*

**The most powerful marketing tool a dentist can use is a camera, and new digital technology allows us to use it much more effectively than in the past.**

*Continued from page 46*

1. The dental office would tell the computer *one time* what was needed for the e-call system: that is, who gets a reminder and when. (Then the office would just forget about recalls.)
2. The e-call system then would search the electronic appointment book for

scheduled appointments, create a reminder message, and send it via e-mail automatically.

3. The e-call system also would search for patients without an appointment—that is, find patients who are due for an appointment and send them a different e-mail message than the one sent to the

scheduled patients. And, the system would send e-mails every day for whatever future time frame you choose.

Furthermore, the system does not have to be limited to prophylaxis recalls; it could track any treatment that needed follow-up, such as a one-year post-op endo check.

An e-call system will save you lots of

# 6 Uses for digital cameras

A digital camera is a valuable dental office tool. Taking good digital photos gives you instant images that can become part of a patient's electronic record. The photos are available the moment they are taken and, ultimately, are more useful and less expensive to acquire than traditional film images. Here are six uses for a digital camera, according to Dr. Emmott:

## 1. Cosmetic imaging

This was the original use for digital cameras in dentistry, and it is still significant. However, there are many other important uses for a digital camera in the dental office, even if you don't do cosmetic imaging.

## 2. Treatment planning

Having a good set of patient photos allows the dentist to refer to them while creating a treatment plan, almost as if the patient were still in the office.

## 3. Documentation

Photos are good for documentation in two ways. First, they are a record of conditions before any treatment was started. This could be important from both a medical/legal standpoint and for future treatment planning. Second, photos allow you to document subtle changes over time such as gingival recession, occlusal wear, or tooth movements.

## 4. Case presentation

Photos of a patient's mouth, whether they are taken with a digital camera or captured off an intraoral camera, are extremely powerful when presenting cases. When patients can see their mouth, they are more likely to understand the need for treatment and accept comprehensive care. Photos can be printed and sent home with patients. Seeing is believing.

## 5. Lab communications

Photos always help the lab do a better job. Digital photos are even better because they are available instantly and can be sent to the lab electronically. The lab can use the photos to help determine shades and, even more significantly, to determine the subtle characterizations unique to each individual. Photos also help with the smile line, gingival contours, dentin shading, tooth shape, and other important details that are so hard to convey with the written word.

## 6. High-tech marketing

Using digital photography creates an image of a modern office. It is the type of WOW dental experience patients talk about. In addition, as you begin to collect good digital images of your patients, the images can be used (with the patient's permission) on various marketing materials. These can include: photos on the walls, a before-and-after album, a practice brochure, and even the practice Web site.

money. It will be much faster, easier to administer, and more comprehensive than any paper system. If you consider the cost of recall cards, postage, and addressing along with the administrative time needed to create and mail paper cards, the annual savings for a typical office of converting from paper to an e-call system could be well over \$6,000.

#### 4. Multimedia patient education

High-tech patient education programs like CAESY Education Systems Inc. or ADH (America's Dental Health) with Joan Lunden from Network One combine full multimedia presentations using sound, animation, and full-motion video with computer technology to produce impressive results. You can think of these programs as the high-tech version of the old tooth picture and drawing on the tray cover. (For a look at why to use these multimedia programs, see "5 Advantages of computer-based patient education programs," on page 50).

#### 5. Online financing

We seldom think of financing as part of marketing. In fact, a lot of dentists are very uncomfortable with anything having to do with fees and payments. However, many times money is the most important factor a patient considers when making a decision on whether or not to have treatment. For an example of financing as a marketing tool, just look at how successful the auto manufacturers have been in the last two years using 0% financing as their major selling point.

In dentistry, we can offer equally successful financial plans using special patient financing programs like CareCredit. What makes such a financing program high-tech is the use of the Internet to set up the financial plan. For example, CareCredit now allows patients to log on and apply for financing online in real time.

With online availability, a patient can work out finances while sitting in a dentist's office or, if the patient is more comfortable working out finances from home, the patient also can apply for credit from there. Either way, the patient will have an answer on financing treatment literally in seconds while still online.

Online financing takes what was once a cumbersome procedure that could stall the decision-making process and makes it fast, easy, high-tech, and impressive.

#### 6. Database marketing

Database marketing is information management in its purest form. Businesses use database marketing all the time to target customers in many ways. For example, companies can segment a particular population into groups by age, sex, locale, occupation, prior buying habits, and hundreds of other categories. Then companies can analyze each of these group's needs, wants, and buying habits and offer the people in each group the products or services they are likely to buy. This is a good thing. It limits solicitations to things

you actually might be interested in, and it saves businesses money by targeting only the most likely buyers.

In the dental office, once you start to use a complete patient-centered, computer-management system, you will accumulate a database on your patients that you can use to target them for specific prod-

ucts, just as companies do.

**Examples of database marketing.** Here are some ways to use database marketing for recall letters.

- A simple example of database marketing would be to sort your recall lists by age. Then send a recall card tailored to each age group and their interests. Older adults

would get one kind of recall notice, children would get another, young adults could get a third, and everybody else could get yet another. Each group sees the office as appealing to them because you present an image, even in something as simple as a recall card.

*Continued on page 50*

## Advantages of computer-based patient education programs

According to Dr. Emmott, there are five advantages to using a computer-based patient education program, as follows:

**1. It saves time.** The doctor or hygienist isn't stuck repeating the same message over and over for each patient.

**2. The message is consistent.**

Whether it is the dentist, assistant, or hygienist presenting the message, it is always the same.

**3. The program provides documented informed consent.** If you are ever challenged as to what you told a patient

regarding treatment, you have the education program to back it up.

**4. The message is a third-party endorsement.** This means that the message isn't from the dentist or the patient, but it is an endorsement of the proposed treatment from an informed third party.

Third-party endorsement is a proven marketing tool.

**5. It makes you look high-tech.** The final advantage is that using these programs helps create and enhance the general high-tech image of your office.

### Continued from page 49

- Another example would be to use something like the PATCH (Pain, Appearance, Time, Cost, Health) system. PATCH is a program developed for a business course called, "Dental Concierge—Developing a CA\$H Practice," taught by Robert H. Maccario. It's designed to be used to contact patients and appeal to their individual needs. (For a detailed example of how this works, see February's "Emmott on Technology" column, available on the Article Index our Web site: [www.dentalproducts.net](http://www.dentalproducts.net).<sup>1</sup>)

- Another approach as sophisticated as the one above would be to search your database for specific people and then send them a marketing letter. For example, you could have the computer search for all patients who have had their teeth whitened in the last few years. Then analyze that group: Is it mostly men or women? What is the average age? What is their primary PATCH motivator?

Once you have determined the people most likely to be interested in whitening, the computer can identify similar patients who haven't yet had their teeth whitened. Then, the computer can send this targeted group information on whitening and other cosmetic dental procedures.

There are many creative ways to use the information you gather once you start using a computer. This is the essence of the information age: Those who understand and use information will profit from it now and in the future. After all, the future is coming and it will be amazing! **DPR**

*Dr. Larry Emmott, a recognized authority on dental technology in America, is a practicing general dentist in Phoenix. He also is an award-winning professional speaker, a featured instructor at the Las Vegas Institute, and a member of the American Academy of Dental Practice Administration. He has written numerous articles on dentistry, computer use, and management. He also writes a monthly electronic newsletter, "Emmott on Technology," on using dental technology effectively. Dr. Emmott offers hands-on technology seminars to selected dentists in his Phoenix office (the next one is Oct. 3-4). At the seminars, you will receive advice on setting up your office to maximize your high-tech future. Topics include digital radiography, cosmetic imaging, and treatment room design. To find out more, check Dr. Emmott's Web site at [www.drlarryemmott.com](http://www.drlarryemmott.com), or he may be reached at 602-279-1641.*

### Reference

1. Emmott L. Non-dental software: 4 business software applications. Dental Products Report 2003;37(2):56-60.