



## The Power of Direct Mail

*Joel Harris, CEO of ADA Intelligent Dental Marketing,* outlines seven common misconceptions many dentists have about marketing their practice.

After years of seeing the effects of both good and bad advertising tactics used to promote dental practices I have formed the strong opinion that the single most effective marketing tactic to create new patient flow is targeted direct mail. Believe me, I've tried them all and nothing "pulls" quite like a direct mail campaign that is well executed.

Broadcast formats such as radio and television don't have the shelf-life that direct mail has and with magazine and yellow page ads you are often swimming in a sea of competing offers and messages. The other problem with many advertising tactics is that they have way to much reach and are too expensive for a dentist to benefit from the consistent frequency of the brand and the offer.

Even though I feel as strongly as I do, a lot of dentists have had negative results from their own direct mail efforts. Such poor results can almost always be attributed to breaking one or more of the rules that make direct mail so effective. Direct mail is not as simple as flinging a postcard into a few thousand mailboxes and watching the new patients lining up at your door. First of all, direct mail requires a comprehensive demographic analysis of the area to be targeted before one dollar is spent.

Next, an aggressive offer is absolutely imperative. Offers such as, Free whitening for new patients, a free



i-pod for a new ortho start, or 50% off in-office whitening are examples of offers that are effective. Offers such as free cosmetic consultations or \$20 discounts on cleanings are weak and won't have the impact that more aggressive offers do.

When I consult with dentists who have failed in past direct mail efforts, the first question I ask is whether the mail piece contained an offer. In almost every case, I hear something like, "well, I didn't want to have to give anything away," or "I want patients to come to my practice because I'm a good dentist, not because I was luring them in with something free." Remember that we live in a world that is bombarding consumers with hundreds of marketing messages every day. If you want your advertising efforts to be effective, you've got to get the consumer's attention, and weak offers or no offer at all just don't cut it anymore.

Quality printing, paper, photography and top graphic design are also must-haves for your direct mail efforts to provide a great return on investment. Remember

that purchasing a quality mailing list that is accurate and contains up-to-date names of new move-ins is important as well as using a mail house that accurately fulfills your mailing.

Another misconception with direct mail marketing is that 1% is an acceptable return. Somewhere, in some twenty-year old marketing text book, this statistic stuck in everybody's mind. The truth is, 1% is a home run. In fact, 1% is out-of-the-park. A more realistic number for dental direct mail marketing is .020% to .035%. That means that a 10,000 piece direct mail campaign should result in 20-35 new patients. However, a 1% return would be 100 patients. Although a 1% return is not unheard of, it's a safer bet to expect something less. Now, I have seen results approaching 1%, however, those results are never the norm. It's kind of like the diet commercials that promise 50 lbs. of weight loss in sixty days. It's possible, but not likely. Typically, such results are seen in markets that are growing rapidly and everyone is looking for a dentist. Las Vegas comes to mind.

Fortunately for dentists, 35 new patients that are appropriately folded into a practice can be worth substantially more than the investment for 10,000 pieces of direct mail. In fact, over time, 35 patients who refer friends and family members and accept treatment that is presented correctly can be worth many thousands of dollars.

Direct mail has to be executed precisely to be effective. The quality of the printing and design, the mailing list, the offer, and the timing are just a few important considerations. Do it right, and make it the foundation of your new-patient acquisition strategy.

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*Joel Harris is a co-founder and President of ADA Intelligent Dental Marketing located in Salt Lake City, Utah. His company provides powerful marketing tools to help dentists grow their patient base, increase the profit and improve their image. Joel is also the author of the book, Breakthrough Dental Marketing.*