

# CONQUERING THE M WORD

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**T**HERE IS PROBABLY NO OTHER word in the laboratory technician's lexicon that creates more trepidation and confusion than "marketing". Successful marketing doesn't happen overnight. It takes time, money and the diligence to follow carefully planned steps. Rego Dental Laboratory got its start in 1980. After 10 years of steady (but not always profitable) growth—fueled mainly by competitive pricing and word-of-mouth communication—it became evident that we would need to expand beyond the competitive Los Angeles market.

Our first shot at marketing entailed a mailing campaign that would target "hot" markets. We developed a design concept, spent several months coming up with the perfect corporate campaign, and printed and mailed 10,000 pieces. Imagine our disappointment when the phone lines didn't ring and the only mail we received were the enormous printing and shipping bills from our futile attempt at marketing.

Change was desperately needed, so we hired a consultant to help us organize a sensible, affordable and successful long-term marketing plan.

**Almaden Marketing Group president Bill Neal worked with us to develop the following 10-step plan for establishing a long-term sustainable growth pattern.**

#### 1. Set your goals.

Determine where you want your lab to be in 3, 5, or 10 years. Is unlimited growth your goal? Do you hope to grow your lab in anticipation of selling the business? Or, do you just want higher-paying and better quality accounts? If you don't have specific goals in mind, then it will be impossible to know whether you succeed or not.

#### 2. Perform a SWOT analysis.

What are your lab's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats? Does your laboratory have a particular skill? Do you have up-to-date equipment? Are you profitable? Do you have access to training? Are your technicians older and less motivated?

#### 3. Develop a simple marketing plan.

What is your market position? Who is your competition? What are your resources? Determine your target markets and develop strategic marketing objectives. After considering our staff, Bill determined that we should concentrate marketing to a few hundred dentists.

#### 4. Create a marketing and growth budget.

The average laboratory spends less than 3% of sales on marketing, while most companies allocate 6% to 10% of overall sales for marketing. We held a creative marketing meeting with Bill and determined that we would allocate 8% of our sales to marketing for a 3-year period. This is NOT a commitment to be made lightly.

#### 5. Develop your internal market.

Evaluate your current client base. Are clients informed of all the services that your laboratory provides? In a national survey, the average dentist admitted to using 3.5 laboratories! Determine what you can do to increase your share of the pie! We targeted our clients with statement stuffers and recorded messages on our phone system when a client is on hold. It was amazing to hear clients state "I didn't know you do Empress inlays." This was almost always followed by request for more information! It is far easier to sell to an existing client who trusts you than a complete stranger.

#### 6. Create support materials.

Repetition is critical in marketing. For us, it was important to keep mailing informative and attractive marketing pieces, yet not seem repetitive. We used printed information developed by Almaden, as well as information pieces that were printed by manufacturers such as Ivoclar. We wanted to create a corporate image that would be easy to recognize, so we developed special stationary (Figure 1)



Fig. 1-4

product brochures, mailing piece, postcards, statement stuffers, and a corporate image brochure that covers all of our lab's services. Congruency in your overall image is critical, so we make sure that everything we send out has our particular style. We also developed a series of marketing objects that were different, such as a series of preparation and cementation kits printed with our logo (Figure 2) that come in metallic cases that sit in front of the doctor when working with patients. Every time the doctor reaches for a burr, there is our name! We also developed clothing items with our logo that we send to all new accounts. This had the unanticipated affect of drawing calls from other dentists who saw our shirts at golfing events!



Fig. 2

Don't feel like you have to do everything yourself. Get your staff involved with generating ideas. Empowering your co-workers goes a long way in developing a team approach. Set goals, dates, and timelines and measure their success.



Fig. 3

#### 7. Develop an implementation plan and execution chart.

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#### 9. Develop your facility.

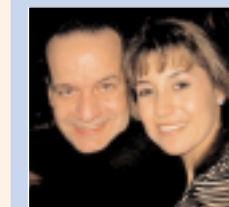
When you are not prepared to handle the resulting growth, you won't get very far. The key is to analyze your growth capacity. For us, our goal was to gain recognition as a small laboratory catering to dentists interested in uncompromising quality. We constructed a 2,500 square foot facility that would comfortably house 12 to 18 technicians.

#### 10. Invest wisely in new technologies.

Try and develop a "nest egg" for future equipment and materials. Develop a Return On Investment cost analysis of new equipment. Make sure you can support this new technology, financially and educationally. Investing in new technology is a must, but it needs to be part of your overall plan.

#### Conclusion

Our goal with marketing was to grow our business to the point where we could spend more time with our families and get rid of



Overworked Technician Syndrome. After all, why work so hard if you can't share your success with the ones you love.

While this plan may not be practical for all laboratories, there are bits and pieces of these 10 steps that should help you become a better marketer. Conquering the "M" word is not an overnight process. It takes a long-term commitment, but taken seriously, it can provide you with "M"any opportunities for success.

