

The importance of never underestimating the value of what we do

A glowing thank you letter from a recent new patient created a great opportunity for promotion and sharing information.

By Sarah Arnold



“When you’re working ‘small miracles’ every day, it’s easy to lose sight of the value of what we do... So if you have a good story, share it...”

When we last spoke in the July/August issue, I was 39-and-a-half weeks pregnant with child number five. Baby Beatrice was born happy and healthy on July 13, leaving me once again amazed by small miracles. Mother and child are very well, thank you.

Of course the “miracle” - like beauty - is in the eye of the beholder. I was recently reminded of this fact by a glowing thank you letter from a new patient. It’s easy to take for granted the value of the work we do day in, day out. To our patients, what we regard as the simplest procedure can be a life-changing experience-by relieving discomfort; by fixing something broken; by making something work better; by preventing future problems; or, as our new patient Debbie recently reminded us, by helping people to look and feel good.

On her first visit to our practice, we took Debbie through our usual new patient procedures. After talking with her for some time, it became obvious she was deeply self-conscious about her teeth. In her own words, she “loved to laugh, but hated her smile”. Debbie did all the usual tricks for hiding her smile: covering her mouth when she laughed; avoiding photos; never wearing lipstick.

It was obvious to us that porcelain veneers could make the world of difference to Debbie’s smile, and how she felt about her appearance. So we prepared a treatment plan and presented our recommendations. Debbie couldn’t believe improving her smile would be such a simple and easy process. She couldn’t book in fast enough!

Debbie was overwhelmed with the results, telling us in a lovely thank you letter that she cried all the way home. She told us how she felt happier and more confident - what’s more, she even

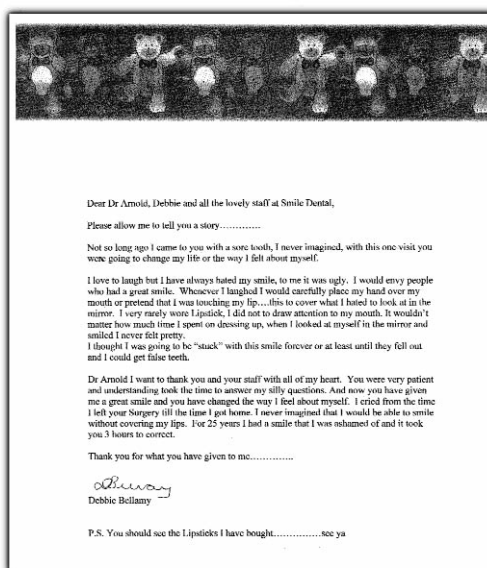


Figure 1. The thank you letter from our new patient Debbie.

received a promotion she never thought she’d get. While we’re not taking the credit for Debbie’s promotion, it’s obvious that we’ve gone a long way towards mending a major impediment to her self-image and confidence.

Of course, we all have wonderful success stories like Debbie’s, and we all receive glowing letters of appreciation from time to time. And whilst we shouldn’t let praise go to our heads, nor should we let the chance pass to share a positive story about the benefits of what we do.

With Debbie’s permission and approval, we shared her story through a regular column we



Figure 2. Telling the story in our regular column in Duo magazine.

contribute to *Duo* - a local lifestyle magazine. Getting stories like this in the local press and print media is a valuable vehicle for communicating with our existing patients, as well as reaching new ones. It's information as well as promotion.

We're constantly telling our patients that their smile is one of their greatest natural assets. And that a nice smile and a sound bite are essential for a happy, healthy you. We've even based our brand identity - "Smile Dental" - on this very idea. But when you're working "small miracles" every day, it's easy to lose sight of the value of what we do.

So if you have a good story, share it. Write a column or story for your local paper. Post it on your website. Print some case histories. Ask your patients for a quote. You may be surprised who you reach (and what you hear!). It's the best way of communicating the services we provide. And the value of what we do.

Editor's note: *The Dental Act in some states of Australia such as Victoria prevent patient testimonial being used in advertising. Check with your local dental board as to the regulations in your state.*

About the author

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When it comes to marketing, be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater

By Sarah Arnold



“for me... the most important aspect of differentiating your practice is personalising your story...”

What makes dental technology great for our patients is very different from what makes it great for us. Sarah Arnold recounts her presentation to the World Clinical Laser Institute 2007 Asia Pacific Symposium, and demonstrates how getting personal gets results.

My marketing column this issue is ostensibly about marketing that state-of-the-art, must-have, whiz-bang gizmo-gadget of the dental practice - the dental laser. But the column is really about babies. Yes, babies. Well, it's about communicating the benefits of a product or service in a manner that creates an emotional connection with another human being - as opposed to telling your target market consumer how amazing you and your product/service are.

You see, at the time of writing this column, I'm 39 weeks and three days pregnant with child number five. Back in May - when I was a mere 33 weeks thus endowed - I gave a presentation at the World Clinical Laser Institute's 2007 Asia Pacific Symposium in Cairns. Contrasting wonderfully with the buff blokes in bespoke suits around me, I had the audience's undivided attention. And I was particularly well prepared for the story I had to tell...

A few months earlier, we had a random enquiry from a somewhat anxious young woman named Alita, asking if we have a dental laser. We had no idea what she had in mind, but confirmed that, yes, we do in fact have a dental laser. Alita then goes on to explain that her Baby Thomas has a tongue-tie and is unable to breastfeed. Doctors have told her that fixing the problem will require surgery and a general anaesthetic. And to make matters worse, there's a two-year waiting list to have the procedure performed in hospital.



The young mum was casting around for a second opinion. Could a dental laser, Alita asked, provide a solution? Our principal dentist, Dr Cameron Arnold - who, incidentally, doubles as my husband, and is the person I hold responsible for my current state - assured her that yes it could.

Baby Thomas was quickly booked in. Cameron performed a lingual frenectomy - quickly and easily and without anaesthetic - using the dental laser. As a sign of a job well done, Baby Thomas immediately poked his tongue out at Cameron. This was the first time Alita had seen her baby poke out his tongue. There wasn't a dry eye in the house!

Nor in the lecture room at this point. I went on to explain to my captivated audience that, although lingual frenectomies are not an everyday

procedure, the story of Baby Thomas created a wonderful opportunity for communicating the human benefits of the dental laser at our very state-of-the-art, whiz-bang practice.

With Alita's permission, we prepared an advertisement and media release around the following theme: "The dental laser - so gentle, it wouldn't hurt a baby. Just ask Thomas!" (Pictured here.) We didn't need to use any technical or medical jargon, or cite any clinical research. We just told the story as it happened. We concluded briefly by adding that we use the dental laser for a range of restorative and cosmetic dental procedures - for patients of all ages. We directed readers to our website for more information.

My brief for the conference presentation was to "reinforce the importance of differentiating your practice from that of your competitors, with emphasis on marketing your skills and technological advances in patient care to your patients"... Or something like that. I think I met the brief. And I think I conveyed

what for me is the most important aspect of "differentiating your practice" - personalising your story.

By personalising, I not only mean focusing your practice image and communications on your patient and the personal benefit. I also mean tailoring your image and communications so they uniquely embody and reflect your particular practice and your particular market. The marketing materials that we're inundated with from dental technology companies (often American or European) have little relevance to our consumer markets here in Adelaide, Broken Hill or Townsville. And what impresses and appeals to our patients is very different from what impresses and appeals to dentists. Patients don't care too much that a laser can give their dentist more time on the golf course.

I've tried to convey the importance of a different approach to marketing. And don't just rely on advertising and PR. Nothing beats good word of mouth and first-hand accounts. Host an information session in

your practice, and invite patients who've had the procedure you're promoting. Ask your patients for a testimonial or if you could feature their case histories on your website. Of course marketing is as much about communicating to our existing patients as well as our potential ones.

The story of Baby Thomas captured the hearts and minds of our market, and my audience at the clinical laser symposium. But right now another baby is doing an equally impressive job of demanding my undivided attention. And, alas, I'm yet to hear of a clinical laser that can make childbirth any easier. Cameron darling ...

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Update: *It's a girl! Sarah have birth to a 7lb 5oz baby girl on Friday July 13. Mother and baby are doing fabulously.*



What high tech means for our practice

BY SARAH ANOLD

As a progressive, modern dental practice, we aim to be at the forefront of dental technology and patient care and provide our patients with the most advanced procedures available. It's a commitment that demands unprecedented and escalating levels of investment - in both financial and human resource terms. But it's one we must make. Dental practices are increasingly technology-driven. They're also increasingly aggressive and competitive in their marketing. And technology is one way we seek to set ourselves apart from the rest in our market's mind.

I believe that a good dental practice brand represents the facilities as well as the service and ethos behind it. Technology is a huge part of the future of dentistry. But it will only build your business if you promote and communicate it correctly.

As dental practitioners, we want to make things easy, accessible and appealing for our patients. Patients want to know that their dentist has the latest and greatest, and keeps abreast of the times. Some technically-minded patients do love to know the ins and outs of the latest equipment, but they're usually in the minority. We need to communicate the benefit - what's in it for them? Precision treatment, successful and long-lasting results, quick recovery.

It's the relationship we have with our patients, and communicating the emotional benefits, that count. Our performance management consultant, Kathleen McKellar from DDS, has always stressed that dental technology will not build our practice; that too many dentists invest too much in the latest gizmos, and not enough in marketing and communicating the benefits to their patients - the real end-users or consumers of the technology.

At Smile Dental, when we commit to new technology, we regard the marketing as as important as the training. Just as important as teaching our staff how to use it, is teaching our patients what benefits it will offer them. When we invested in a dental laser, for instance, we heralded its arrival with a patient information brochure,

website content, advertisements in local lifestyle magazines, and random show-and-tell-type demonstrations in the practice - all communicating the benefits for the patient. We promote the benefits of the dental laser to the patient in terms of comfort, efficacy and efficiency. Less time and discomfort for the patient is a serious motivator.

For our hygienist, Laurelyn Higgins, the benefits of technology fall into several categories:

“We need to communicate the benefit - what’s in it for them? Precision treatment, successful and long-lasting results, quick recovery?”

- Convenience - making our job easier;
- Productivity - working better;
- Peace of mind - confidence in our work;
- Status/image - being perceived as professional and progressive; and
- Enthusiasm - user satisfaction/enjoyment.

“Thanks to the internet and television, the general public - our patients - are more informed than ever before” Laurelyn says. “A survey of 7000 dental practices in America identified the main reason for the increased demand for cosmetic dentistry was media coverage. They equate technology with the skill level of the dentist as well as the image of the practice. Patients need proof that what we're doing is working. That is, cues and clues. So intra-oral cameras for example are a necessity, not a luxury.”

But the latest technology also means more to our dentists and support staff than just improved patient care and productivity. Let's face it, dentists love gadgets. Look at

the most popular stands at the trade exhibitions; look at the biggest advertisements in this journal. In their downtime, our dentists can be found playing with the latest practice gadget, or scanning the industry journals and internet for the latest breaks in dental technology. Our noticeboards are strewn with ads, articles and print-outs on emerging technology.

For our practice principal, Dr Cameron Arnold, dental technology also works to stimulate the enthusiasm of staff. “As a dentist, I want to keep my interest levels high and maintain my enthusiasm for the job. This enthusiasm rubs off on patients.”

Cameron highlights the impact the CEREC unit had on the practice and patients. “When we got the CEREC, there was a high level of enthusiasm. We involved the patients in the treatment by showing them how it worked - showing them the restoration milling. Acquiring new equipment and increasing our skills help us enhance our service and build patient confidence. The excitement of working at the cutting edge, as well as the productivity improvements it brings, contributes to the bottom line.”

But, as I'm sure many of you will agree, keeping in touch and in step with technology ain't easy. When yet another new piece of whizbangery is set to revolutionise dentistry, we need to weigh up if and when we'll take it up, and take on the burden of investment, training, marketing and maintenance. Objectively assessing emerging technology is difficult. Industry journals such as this one are essential in providing objective assessment and peer review.

We live and work in a high-tech society. We're impressed with what technology can do, and the benefits it can bring to our lives and lifestyles. But we need to remain focused on the benefits as much as the obligatory bells and whistles.

Oops... Gotta go... My Blackberry's beeping!

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Advertising and PR: more than a smart strategy - it's our duty!

BY SARAH ARNOLD

Now before you say “I don’t advertise” or “I don’t respond to advertising” and turn the page, think about the toothpaste you used this morning (and the brands you didn’t use); the car you drove to work (and the ones you didn’t drive); the mobile phone you nearly forgot to grab (and the ones you did forget)!

As the Prime Minister has recently been going to great lengths to assure us, advertising is a legitimate and effective method for communicating a message to a market (Wow, what we could do with a \$30 million budget!).

Like it or not, advertising and public relations are central to the consumer societies in which we live. They’re a condition and a symptom of the diversity of products and services we enjoy. And, let’s face it, we do enjoy choice. So, while you and I may not be the mass media consumers many marketers seem to think we are, we are susceptible/responsive to the marketing of products in our field of interest and sector of the market.

I drive the car I drive because I believe it’s safe and reliable, it’s stylish but not too pretentious, and it carries four kids in comfort - or as close to comfort as you can get with four kids. Cameron, my husband the dentist, drives the car he drives because... OK, I have no idea why Cameron drives the car he drives. But that’s another story.

Like lasers and espresso machines, advertising and PR are relatively new in dentistry. Some have taken to it, like crocs to tourists. Others are reserving their judgement. At Smile Dental, we’ve been fairly progressive in our approach. Though our style and presentation are reasonably restrained, we are “out there”.

The primary motivation for us has been the potential to attract the type of new patients we want for our practice. We promote our “brand”, we communicate our services, and we never miss an opportunity for a bit of PR. And we’re not just promoting ourselves - we’re promoting the whole industry. We’re transforming the public perception of a much-maligned



industry, and we’re communicating what’s on offer, what’s possible, and what’s new.

Of course, advertising and PR aren’t just targeted at new patients. There are also considerations and potential benefits for our existing patients. What do we want them to think about us, their dentists? What do we want them to think about their oral health and dentistry in general? With the rapid advances in dentistry these days, we have a duty to communicate the new treatments.

Advertising folk will tell you the most important thing is to think outside the square. With many messages competing for attention, you need to make your message unique. And this doesn’t just relate to what your ad says/looks like. You need to think carefully about what you say, how you say it, and where. You can even rethink what constitutes an “ad”. After all, dentistry is about as special and unique and interesting as anything else you’re likely to see advertised, from breakfast cereal to jeans. More on that matter later.

Remember “oils ain’t oils”? Well, ads ain’t ads either. Your campaign may seek to inform/educate and convey a particular message. You may wish to promote a special offer. Or you may seek to build your brand and awareness (as I’ve said before,

there’s an aspect of this in everything you do). For some people, and in some respects, advertising is a short-term knee-jerk response or direct endeavour to land new patients today. For others, in other respects, it’s a long-term project. Kathleen, our management consultant, likens advertising to casting a net and not knowing what you’re going to catch.

Whether you’re a new business or an established practice, the objective of your advertising/PR/marketing is twofold: to attract the right new clients, and to secure/retain existing clients; to promote your service and build your brand. You have to know how to create a great campaign. And, for the smartest ad to really work, it needs to be part of an overall marketing plan that suits your practice and supports the kind of work you want to do. Like the clothes you wear, it is very individually you. What suits us here in a high end practice in Mundingburra won’t necessarily work for a family dentist in Indooroopilly.

Of course, some things work better than others. And it’s often hard to know which. Some initiatives can have an immediate effect with some members of our market, while others can take ages to deliver. Some don’t work at all. To paraphrase

advertising guru David Ogilvy, half of our advertising spend is probably wasted - if only we knew which half!

The worst thing you can do is misrepresent yourself. Get it wrong, and you can do more harm than good. A bad ad will be ineffective or meaningless or worse - it can have a negative impact on your practice. Yes, you can "un-advertise" your business by turning off potential clients. There *is* such a thing as bad publicity.

I'll talk briefly about some of the advertising/PR efforts that have generated good feedback for us. Some may be relevant to you and your practice, or at least jog your thinking.

These are some of the advertising/communications media/methods we've explored/tried to exploit:

- Print media - Yellow Pages, news-papers, magazines;
- TV, cinema;
- Radio;
- Outdoor billboards;
- Internet website;
- Display/"point of sale" - photos, posters, stickers on apples.

We were keen to use radio, and the local networks were always trying to flog us a schedule. But we were somewhat averse to those poorly conceived and produced pre-recorded commercials, not to mention the dreaded "cash for comment" live read!

So we devised a segment as part of one station's breakfast program where our hygienist Laurelyn talks to the announcers about dental hygiene issues. The hygienist is an important marketer and educator (this is one of the key factors behind our dental hygiene workshops).

Each morning, the announcers would call Laurelyn and chat about a preselected topic for a minute. Of course, we had to thoroughly brief and educate the presenters. The calls were pre-recorded before going to air. It'd kick off something like this...

Presenter: *Laurelyn, is it true that more men than women have bad breath?*

Laurelyn: *Well I hate to do them in but... yes ...*

It was interesting, informative and very listen-able. It worked for the listener, the station and for us, creating a lasting impression with new and existing clients. The audience would get a good dose of oral health and hygiene education. It effectively advertised Smile Dental. And it raised the profile of dentistry.

We conduct a dental hygiene seminar several times a year at Smile Dental. As part of the program, I present a segment on marketing the hygiene department - which I see as a master key to marketing the dental practice (see the article on the latest seminar in Spectrum). I ask the dentists for feedback on their advertising. Do they advertise? How? Why? Why not?

Personally, I love to advertise Smile Dental. As *Advertising Today* has observed, advertising is more than a means of moving merchandise - it has become recognised as an art form and as a central, defining element of popular culture. It's a creative outlet for our practice, and it works. It attracts new patients, and our existing patients love to see us out there and know what we're doing.

Sometimes, I'll hear a dentist say that they don't need to advertise and that they prefer to rely on word of mouth. Of course, word of mouth is the best advertising money can't buy. But there are many things we can do to pave the way - this is where advertising and PR come in.



Our existing patients aren't just a valuable market, they're also a valuable medium.

When it comes to PR, you need to familiarise yourself with the local media - get to know who's who, and let them know who you are. And never miss an opportunity for a media release. If the moment and your message are right, the media will actually welcome your contribution. What's more, when the media wants a comment on a current issue, who do you think they're going to call?

Recently, local television called on us when our region was debating the pros and cons of fluoridated water supply. Channel Seven News called us asking for a professional perspective. And of course we were only too happy to oblige. Because we're the most visible and media-active member in our local industry, we're invariably the first point of contact when the media wants an "expert opinion".

As I've said in previous columns, spon-

sorships and participation in community events are "good PR". Once again, here are a few of the things we've been involved with...

- Nursing home/community care centre visits - free check-ups and dental hygiene awareness programs, for patients and staff.
- Dental Awareness Month - conducting education programs in schools; contributing to local media; in line with the annual nationwide campaign.
- Participation in health/lifestyle expos as exhibitor and presenter.
- Contributing columns and features to local papers and magazines.
- Donating hampers/sponsoring prizes for charity/community endeavours.
- Participating in community activities and benefits, such as fun runs and charity events.
- Participating in local award programs, such as the Telstra and Queensland Government Small Business Award (we won it in 2002, and we're still dining out on it!).
- Sponsorships of music festivals; sporting teams and events; and school fundraisers.

I have this somewhat virtuous idea that our "sexy" advertising at Smile Dental helps to influence and shape the public perception of dentistry. There is still a sordid image and bad taste out there in the minds and mouths of our market. And it'll probably take the rest of our lifetimes to wear off.

Take a look at the Diesel jeans ad reproduced here (left). *Advertising Today's* Warren Berger says "Absurd scenes, stylised photography and iconic copy were the hallmarks of this campaign. The ads were mocking something, but it wasn't clear what."

Well it's clear to me Warren - it's mocking dentistry! This has always been the case, and I feel sorry for all the dentists of the world! So every time we put together the smallest ad or a full campaign, we think about our responsibility to raise the perception of our profession.

We all have a part to play, and it won't happen overnight. Before we can communicate the benefits of what we do, we need to overcome that lingering negative public perception.

Now there's something for you to get your teeth into.

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