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Dentists turn to marketing after getting brush-off from patients

The economic downturn has taken a big bite out dentists' revenue and profits, forcing them to hire experts to help increase sales. They're redesigning websites, pampering their clients and using social media.

By Duke Helfand, December 1, 2011



Dr. Terry Vines examines longtime patient Tom Sertick, 68, in his Redlands dental office. When hundreds of patients stopped coming because of the economic downturn, Vines hired a marketing firm. (Gina Ferazzi, Los Angeles Times / November 28, 2011)

For a quarter-century, Dr. Terry Vines built his Redlands dental practice the old-fashioned way: one mouth at a time.

Vines sponsored youth soccer teams. He renovated historic buildings around town to build good will. He turned his waiting room into a cozy nook with soft chairs and a big-screen TV.

As business increased, Vines hired more dentists to accommodate his thriving practice, Pure Gold Professionals in Dentistry.

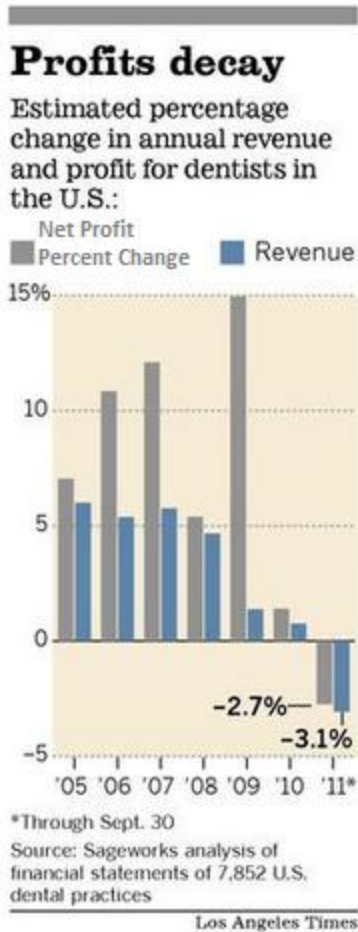
Then the economy tanked, hundreds of patients stopped coming, and Vines decided he needed help.

Scouring the Internet and dental magazines, the 53-year-old dentist discovered a host of marketers and consultants — all promising to make dentistry pay.

For the right price, the marketers would unlock the mysteries of success, offering seminars and coaching sessions with titles like "Profit Centers for Your Practice" and "Secrets of the Dental Insurance Industry."

This year, Vines hired one of the marketing firms, Excellence in Dentistry. The Indiana company redesigned his website, adding colorful photographs of his staff, biographies of the office's six dentists and glowing patient

testimonials. "I would definitely recommend these caring and gentle people to any of my friends and family," a patient says in one of the tributes.



In 2012, Vines' consultant plans to launch an email newsletter for patients and a blog to promote teeth-whitening techniques, new laser technology to identify cavities and other services.

Vines also intends to give patients a little post-treatment pampering, supplying warm towels to go along with the bottled water in the waiting-room refrigerator.

"It's time we step it up," said Vines, who cut back his hours over the last two years when revenue dropped about 10%. "I believe I'm in a position to grow with the right marketing."

For years, dentists relied on their good reputations to attract customers, figuring it was enough to hang a shingle, perform a valuable service and earn a trusted name.

That was before patients started skipping twice-a-year cleanings, postponing fillings and taking a pass on root canals.

Dentistry, once thought recession-proof, has become a casualty of the tough economy. Americans increasingly see dental care as a luxury, even though neglecting their teeth can lead to serious health hazards, including heart disease.

Dentists say many patients no longer can tap equity in their homes to pay for implants and other elective treatments. Bank financing for dental work, long a popular way to pay for care, has dried up as lenders stiffened loan standards.

California's budget crisis has contributed to the problem. The state sharply slashed funding for its Denti-Cal program for the poor two years ago, leaving vast numbers of low-income adults without dental coverage.

Dentists are feeling the pinch: Revenue at American dental offices has dropped steadily over the last three years, according to financial data from nearly 8,000 practices collected by Sageworks Inc., a financial analysis firm in North Carolina.

This year is shaping up to be the worst since 2005. In the first nine months of 2011, dentists have reported an average 3% decline in revenue and profit.

The downturn has forced dentists to cut hours, lay off staff and slash their own pay. Many remain worried. In an August survey by the American Dental Assn., 45% of dentists said they were "not at all confident" about future economic conditions. Older dentists were more downbeat than younger ones.

"Right now, your practicing dentist is very unsure of where the future is going," said Dr. Matthew Messina, a Cleveland dentist who serves as a consumer advisor for the American Dental Assn. "We're looking for any ray of sunshine."

Dr. Luis Dominicis has responded by working harder. He extended weekday hours at his Downey dental practice, and he sees patients two Saturdays a month. He hasn't raised prices in five years and said he has no intention of doing so, despite rising costs for anesthesia and other supplies.

"You've got to stay competitive," Dominicis said. "At least I'm able to put in the extra hours."

The sense of uncertainty has created an opening for marketers. One of the most successful, DentalWebsites.com, said its client roster has doubled in the last 18 months, to about 800 customers.

The West Virginia company charges an average \$5,000 to design websites, and \$300 to \$400 more each month to update the sites and position them on Internet search engines, among other services.

The firm is owned by a husband-and-wife team, Greg and Mary Rahall. He's a computer engineer; she has a master's degree in industrial relations. They got their start in dental marketing more than a decade ago when they created a website for a dentist in their family, who recommended them to others.

"I feel great that our business is booming," Mary Rahall said. "We help dentists get a bigger share of a shrinking market."

Not all dentists are sold on marketing as the answer to their difficulties.

Dr. Victor Sobrepeña has been advertising his Northern California practice for nearly a decade. But even with billboards, a website, and radio and television ads, business at Foster City Sedation Dentistry has dropped by about half since the recession struck in 2008.

Sobrepeña has cut his marketing budget to about \$1,000 a month from \$10,000.

"If you're spending money on marketing and you're not getting the return on investment and you're actually losing money, you're not going to be following that strategy very long," Sobrepeña said.

Vines, however, sees marketing as the smartest way to grow, even though it's new and unfamiliar.

When Vines entered dentistry in 1985, he wanted to follow the path of his childhood dentist in Rialto, a mentor who made the job seem worthwhile because it involved helping people.

Vines stayed close to home after earning his degree from the Loma Linda University School of Dentistry, briefly practicing in San Bernardino before moving to Redlands.

"I'm a local guy," said Vines, an elder in his Redlands church who has raised five children with his wife of 31 years, Geneil.

Vines figured that as a dentist, he would enjoy a comfortable living. But the economy changed, and that meant viewing fellow practitioners not only as peers but also as competitors.

That's why Vines hired Steffany Mohan, a fellow dentist and marketing consultant who says that keeping patients satisfied is as important as persuading them to walk through the door.

Mohan emphasizes personal service: Dentists should offer sedation to patients nervous about pain, and make dental care feel like a trip to the spa with amenities such as scented neck wraps, moisturizing lotions, heated massage pads and video screens mounted on the ceiling above dental chairs.

"People don't necessarily remember what you said or did, but they'll remember how you made them feel," Mohan said. "We're going for giving them an experience they'll remember so they won't go anywhere else."

Vines said he expects to spend \$35,000 to \$50,000 over the next year on Mohan's marketing strategies. Some of her tips are old-school: sending postcards to patients reminding them to return for checkups and teaching the staff to be more friendly and upbeat when answering the phones.

But her advice also is prompting Vines to rethink the way he builds his business. For the first time, he is marketing on Facebook, and he plans to add Twitter and Groupon early next year.

"Word of mouth will only take you so far," he said. "I want to take it to the next level."

For the full story featuring Sageworks' data and analysis, please visit [The Los Angeles Times - Dentists turn to marketing after getting brush-off from patients](#)