

## Keep Marketing Communication Contagious with Kayla Hoorelbeke

With the popularity of the paperless office, advances in technology, and the ubiquity of email and social media, orthodontic practices have access to cost-effective options for reaching a multitude of their current and potential patients. Yet while they may be cost-effective, are they marketing-effective? While more and more ideas go “viral”, this article is about what happens when a marketing epidemic loses effectiveness – otherwise known as “immunity”.

If you currently have more than ten unread emails in your inbox or have already forgotten the Facebook status updates you read two minutes ago, this is a glimpse into the communicative immunity affecting our society.

This concept of immunity is best illustrated with something we all know and love – telemarketing. While telemarketing calls used to be a cost-effective way to sell everything, they are now a cost-effective way to sell nothing. Consumers no longer respond to telemarketing because of its prevalence and frequency. This is the inevitable future of text message marketing and email blasts – consumers will begin to ignore this communication to the point where they will no longer be a viable marketing option. And without continuous improvements and examinations of your marketing communication strategy, your practice will get lost in the sea of e-communication.

### **Marketing is Not a Paperless Activity**

A recent report from Experian Marketing Services shows a 5.4% increase in email volume over the past year. While it seems hard to believe that email volume actually has room to grow, it's easy to assume there has been even greater growth in social media activity. By communicating solely via online avenues, you are facing an exponential increase in competition for your patients' attention.

Furthermore, although an email or a text may be quick and easy, or even automatic, a successful marketing plan should include concrete physical evidence, conveying the image of your practice. If your New Patient Welcome is sent via email, you are missing a key opportunity to make a first impression. Without a New Patient Walkout Packet following their exam, you are not providing potential patients with an essential decision-making tool, keeping your practice fresh in their mind.

Physical evidence is important with existing patients too. There are several convenient options for practices to provide their patients with prizes and rewards via an online account and a website. They're generally more cost-effective and efficient, but if the practice could still be part of the equation by providing certain rewards or prizes on-site, you will create intrinsic opportunities your patients will remember.



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## **Variety is Key**

Traditional print communication is necessary, but it is equally important to keep up with technology and relate to your target market. Effectiveness comes in variety – utilizing email, text, phone, and traditional mail is necessary to keep the attention of your patients. Even if you're a paperless office, the patient should always have the choice of how they'd like to receive communication from your office; ask for their preferences during their first appointment.

If possible, you should be varying the times you communicate with patients too. The Experian report also analyzed the days of the week and times of the day when emails are more likely to be opened and acted upon. Saturday and Sunday had the most "unique opens", but alternatively had the lowest volume of emails. The response rates were highest in the evening hours between 8pm-12am; this is something to consider if you're sending emails that require a response such as pending follow up work.

Within all communication, the message should also be varied. Facebook pages and Twitter feeds should include links to other articles, announcements of news in the practice, humorous posts, community interest stories, thought-provoking posts, and posts that solicit feedback and interaction. Social media connoisseur Shaquille O'Neal has developed a formula with his social media coach – 60% of his posts are funny, 30% are inspiring, and 10% of the time he is "selling" or acting as a spokesperson. If he wasn't following a formula like this, would he have as many followers? Would his followers trust his opinion? And therefore would he get paid large sums of money to speak on behalf of companies? Probably not.

## **Word-of-Mouth: Back and Better Than Ever**

The age of e-communication has actually placed an even greater importance on traditional word-of-mouth communication. When consumers are bombarded with information on a daily basis, they need a filter – that's where word-of-mouth comes in. Consumers are seeking the opinions of friends, family members, co-workers, etc. more than ever to determine what is worthy of their attention and which decisions they should make. This means that more resources should be allocated towards strengthening personal relationships with your patients and community rather than putting everything into your online image. Having a strong following in the virtual world is absolutely necessary, but without a strong following in the real world your online presence will not have an ongoing impact.

Striking a balance between traditional, personal, and online forms of communication will help your practice's message have a greater reach and impact. While it may require a greater investment, it will also produce a greater *return* on your investment. Focusing all of your efforts on technology and social media alone eliminates the opportunity for those memories and connections that will keep your practice infectious and contagious for years to come.



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