



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

BY SARAH ARNOLD

**N**ow 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.

*Sarah Arnold is Marketing and Practice Manager at Smile Dental in Townsville, Queensland, and a guest lecturer in marketing at James Cook University. The practice is in the process of licensing its identity and practice program. She can be contacted at sarah@smiledental.com.au*