Practice Management

Raising your practice profile

Want to attract new patients or get your practice achievements in the news? Denplan show you how to gain positive media coverage

In the current financial climate, retaining your private patients and attracting new ones has never been tougher and you can't afford to sit back and be complacent.

Dentists need to recognise that they are not just oral health practitioners, but small-business owners and managers as well. Like any commercial business, the dental practice needs to communicate its messages, achievements or services, and to do this, it needs to develop good press relations with its local media.

Learning how to do this effectively can make a huge difference to the quality of coverage you obtain and help you retain and attract new patients. Here are a few tips to get your PR plan started.

Be proactive

The key to gaining positive press coverage is to keep a constant lookout for opportunities to raise the profile of your practice. If you have had a bad experience with the media in the past, try not to take it to heart. Persistence pays off.

Finding out what your target audience reads, watches or listens to will really pay dividends and will make the relationship with your target media more successful. One of the easiest ways to find out this type of information is to speak directly to regular patients or ask them to complete a short, simple questionnaire to find out about their favourite newspapers, magazines and radio stations. Consider entering respondents' names into a prize draw to maximise the response rate.

By finding out exactly what your current patients read, you are far more likely to attract like-minded people through targeted press releases and articles.

National versus local

It's a common mistake to think that the national media is the most effective way to reach your target audience. It is however far easier to secure coverage in regional and local papers, and these will play a more prominent role in the local community and subsequently your target audience.

Having identified publications you would like to appear in, educate yourself about the types of articles they feature. This will tell you what stories are most likely to be picked up by these publications, saving you from sending a story which is unlikely to be of interest.

Develop a strong story

Topics most likely to gain coverage are usually about people. Before-and-after case studies and practice news that link up with the national campaigns such as Mouth Cancer Awareness Week are an effective way to catch journalists' attention. Holding events such as open evenings or encouraging your practice team to become involved in charity fundraising activities can also be a good basis for a story.

Practice news is also of interest to your local publications, especially if you have expanded your offering in some way. The appointment of a new dentist, relocation of your practice, refurbishment of your premises or an award or accreditation will all remind local people you are there, giving them a reason to contact you, book an overdue appointment or sign up as a new patient.

Use the right tools

Here is a summary of some of the most effective PR tools and how each of them can help your practice:

- Press releases: are short announcements about any news your practice may have. The key points should cover: who, what, when, where and why. If you can embed these in your first paragraph you have immediately told journalists exactly what they want to know.
- Photographs: local press find it more difficult to find pictures than text, so by supplying a good photograph, you are more likely to have your copy included.
- Competitions: are a great way of getting coverage and attracting new patients. You could make the competition available only to people registering as a new patient, but the prize will have to be worth it.
- Case studies: by producing an article about how you helped a patient, with plenty of before and after pictures, you are showcasing your clinical expertise and people considering a similar treatment will be more likely to call you.
- Events: promoting an open day or community event will not only get your practice in print, but will encourage people to visit your surgery. By inviting key members of the press, you are also likely to have the event followed up in a later article.
- Research: local papers love regional statistics and they can be used as a story in their own or act as support material for another story. It is also fairly easy to produce, but collating information from your patient questionnaires.

Tips for journalists: journalists like to quote someone who can speak with authority on a particular issue or story. Decide in advance what you want to get across and anything you don't want to say, as nothing is ever 'off the record'.

However you decide to promote your practice to the media, always ask yourself, 'What's in it for the reader?' Editors will not print anything which simply talks about how great you are. By asking yourself if what you are presenting is of interest to their readership, you can create more valuable and informative copy, which is far more likely to be published.

Avoid sending text attachments

Journalists are busy people who receive many press releases and story ideas every day. If you decide to send your press releases by email, avoid attachments. When journalists open an email, they will quickly scan through it to see if it is relevant and attachments often make them inclined to 'go back to it later', when it might be too late to be of interest, or worse still, hit the delete button instead. Images submitted as an attachment are useful too, but ensure that they are not more than two megabytes in size, each.

If you still feel uncertain about the best way to raise your practice's profile, the Denplan press office is more than happy to provide assistance and support with your public relations activity. Call the press team on 01962 827951.