



High numbers of new patients are NOT the answer!

By Julie Parker

If the question is “How can I build a sustainably strong dental practice?”, I assure you that high numbers of new patients are NOT the answer.

In my role of dental consultant and coach, I see many practices striving for higher and higher numbers of new patients. The result in almost every instance is a very busy practice, but not an effective or profitable one.

The strength and profitability of a practice depends upon the quality of its patient list. Patients who add high value to a practice are those who:

- Come in regularly for their recall visits;
- Are loyal, choosing only to attend your practice;
- Schedule for advised treatments; and
- Refer new patients to you.

When I consult, I break up patient lists into three main categories (Figure 1):

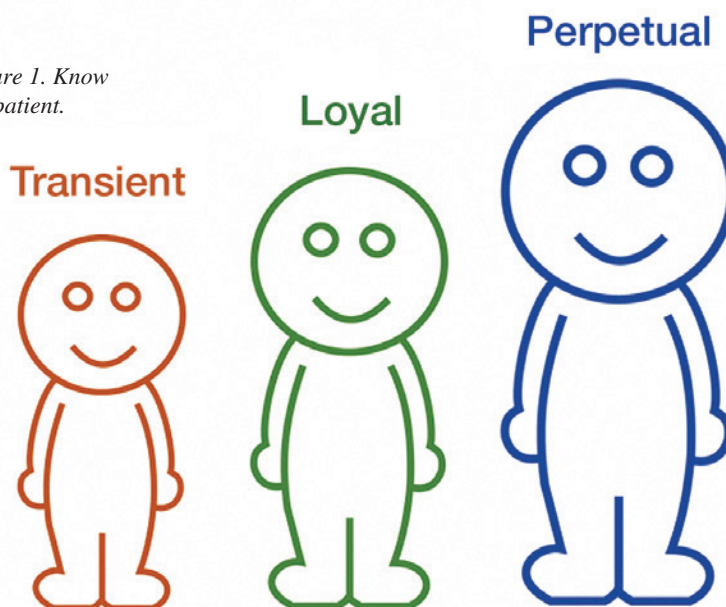
The transient patient

Transient patients are those who will attend primarily for emergency treatments when things go wrong, such as a toothache or broken tooth. They are not loyal, in that they will call around until they find a practice who can see them at a time that is convenient for them should you not offer it. They generally do not attend for recalls and often neglect other problem areas of their mouths despite dentist advice or warnings.

The loyal patient

Loyal patients only want to attend your practice and will fit into your schedule even if it is inconvenient for them. They may not attend every six months for recalls but they do come in for maintenance visits

Figure 1. Know thy patient.



every couple of years or so. Loyal patients will accept the advice of their dentist and return for all conservative treatment.

The perpetual patient

Perpetual patients are those who attend for their recall visits strictly every 6-12 months. They would never dream of seeking treatment elsewhere, only ever attending your practice. They commit to all conservative treatment and will carefully consider additional recommendations that you may suggest, such as implants, reconstructive and aesthetic services.

Busyness is not a KPI!

I have noted that practices who attract high new patient numbers find it a challenge to get these patients to return and complete their entire treatment plan and

rarely see them for recalls. These practices have a lot of “busy-ness” going on but it is not translating into the increased turnover they had wished for. I believe these poor results occur when marketing campaigns appeal to Transient patients and turn off Loyal and Perpetual patients.

To give you an example of what I mean, imagine you develop a chronic oral condition. You are someone who cares about their health, are gainfully employed and take responsibility for your life. You conduct an online search to find a good oral specialist. You come across two websites; one is professional and health-focused with no mention of fees. The other is filled with special offers and discounted services. Who would you select?

The website with special offers and discounted services does two things that will damage a dental practice’s chances of thriving:


PATIENT AVATAR			
 Age: Gender: Ethnicity: Marital Status: #/Age of Children: Location: Occupation: Annual Income: Level of Education: Other:	GOALS & VALUES Goals: Values:	CHALLENGES & PAIN POINTS Challenges: Pain Points (Fears, Frustrations):	
	SOURCES OF INFORMATION Books: Websites: Influencers/Gurus: Documentaries:	OBJECTIONS & ROLE IN PURCHASE PROCESS Objections to the sale: Role in the Purchase Process:	

Figure 2. It's important to understand who your ideal patient "avatar" is.

1. They appeal only to the Transient type of patient; and
2. They repel the very patients who will add value to their practice.

Attracting Transient patients also forces your practice to introduce systems to alleviate the impact of their poor behaviour, such as late cancellations, failed appointments and issues with fees and accounts. These very systems may address the challenges Transient patients bring to your practice but they will alienate your Loyal and Perpetual patients who have always been model patients. They will feel increasingly disengaged from your practice and may start searching for a practice that will better suit their ethics, values and personality.

Know your avatar

To build a truly sustainable and viable dental practice, you need to become quite specific in who you are appealing to when you design your promotional content and strategies. To use a marketing concept, you need to determine who your "avatar" is.

Your avatar is your ideal patient. In terms of a strong, viable practice, this would be a Perpetual patient. Focus your thoughts on this patient - who they are and what they value - and then design all of your marketing to appeal directly to them.

The key is to be specific. You want your ideal patient to discover your website, advertising and social media pages and then to feel you are reading their minds. You do this by identifying their goals, values, fears and dreams.

Think of a Perpetual patient who you enjoy treating and want more of in your practice. Then, to the best of your knowledge and experience, complete the guide shown in Figure 2 (Bear in mind that women make the majority of dental appointments so you may choose a female patient as your avatar. Alternatively, make two avatars - one male and one female.)

Once you have the profiles of your ideal patients, you may want to give her a name to further personalise her. Have this person in your mind when you are developing marketing content and strategies so you are attracting the "right" person to your practice.

Despite the highly competitive nature of today's dental industry, there is still the clear and present potential to thrive. Practices need to become more sophisticated in their approaches to their markets and become selective with the patients they wish to attract. Resist the urge to have high numbers of new patients beating a path to your door and instead, strive to get a smaller number of the right people converting to your practice for the long term as Perpetual patients.

About the author

Julie Parker's whole career has been devoted to the dental industry, starting in 1987 as a dental nurse. In 2003, Julie became the first non-dentist to buy a dental practice in Australia. She owned and managed her practice in Brighton, Victoria for 10 years. During this time, she more than trebled the turnover and her staff base grew from 3 to 12 members. Julie successfully cultivated a winning team and a winning business. Her business programs on how to accomplish a dream dental business are gleaned from her wealth of experience, intensive education and an inquisitive business mind. Julie is a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Time Line Therapy and Hypnotherapy.

Julie Parker Practice Success provides dental teams with coaching and training so they can work together and achieve successful outcomes for their dental practice. Contact Julie on 0407-657-729 or julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au and discover what is on offer to help your team members develop the skills to run an efficient, productive and happy practice.