



## Is 'branding' a dirty word?

**A**re we non-cosmetic and painful dentists? I hope we are neither. Yearly, Fortune 500 companies spend billions of dollars branding their products and services. In our professional healthcare business, we use the same principles to help elevate our practice to the next level.

What is branding anyway? To different individuals, it is different things. To me, branding should reflect your identity, reputation and image, and the promises that your patients can believe in. It should illustrate who you are. A brand should always be first class. It must have character and credibility.

When you think of Disney, Victoria's Secret, Apple or Gatorade, many images and emotions are elicited. This is branding at its finest. Branding works both cognitively and viscerally. It is a combination of what the mind thinks it knows and what the gut feels. For this to have a positive effect on your practice, the patient should be reached both intellectually and emotionally. This can be accomplished in a multitude of ways. It needs to be individualized to both the doctor and the practice. If branding is not done appropriately, the net results will be far more

deleterious than doing nothing at all.

Successful branding requires consistency, positioning, leadership and organization. If your message is inconsistent, confusion ensues. Your message needs to have a uniform look and quality. When you promise your patients something, you must attempt to deliver it every time. Mixed messages result in unhappy patients. Unhappy patients don't refer or come back. A brand should not be ambiguous. If your messages and promises are not clear, your brand will hurt you. It should not be hokey, outdated, weak, boring or like everybody else's. You don't want to be identified as brand X.

Your branding position needs to be open and show

uniqueness. There is no shame in tooting your own horn in an ethical, non-offensive way. A good message not only promotes your business, but also tends to invigorate the staff. It is no accident that successful offices tend to have happy, productive, long-term employees. As a result, performances and care tend to be elevated.

The doctor should be the leader, architect and cheerleader for the brand. The staff needs to be on board, too. People tend to power brands. You are only as good as the weakest link of your practice or organization. Each element of planning and implementation should be a group effort. Messages, promises, scripts, office décor and appearances should all be incorporated with your brand. Employee unity strengthens a brand. While these aspects are internal, they are very evident to the patient. Consumers and patients tend to pay more money for brands and services in which they have confidence.

Awards and certificates earned by the doctors and staff should be showcased. You can create a "wall of fame" in the waiting room. Articles authored by the doctors or concerning the practice should be displayed. Patients tend to feel better when they have confidence in you. We are the experts and our patients should be convinced of it. They need to be educated. We have to create an environment and feeling that promotes goodwill.

In today's marketplace, a personalized, interactive Web site is essential. Patients and consumers are utilizing the Internet more than ever. Like your brand, your Web site should be clear, current and clean. Domain names, linking with search engines and legal trademarking are a few of the considerations to be made.

Additional modalities can help define your brand. However, each by itself does not comprise a brand. Logos, taglines, mission statements, stationary, community activities, sponsorships and promotional products can help strengthen a brand. For me, Bob Chinn's restaurant has hit the mark on promotional products. My plates and mugs continually remind me where "I got my crabs."

So, let us fire up and get our branding irons HOT! ■

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