



Implant Game Changers

A Whitepaper Series By Roger P. Levin, DDS

Implant Game Changers is a monthly whitepaper on an important implant practice management topic. It provides you with a quick and easy way to understand a specific business challenge and how to translate the solution into higher production and profit, greater efficiency, more implant patients, lower stress and greater personal satisfaction. These whitepapers will contain recommended actions and strategies for a stronger and faster COVID-19 recovery and sustained practice success.

Referral Marketing – A Quick Course

Introduction

Most implant specialty practices have a very high dependence on referring doctors for implant referrals. There are certainly opportunities to gain patients by communicating directly to the public but referring doctors have built some of the largest and best implant specialty practices in the United States and worldwide. Each dental specialty is somewhat different, but one commonality is that the more referrals from referring doctors the higher the production and success of the specialty practice.

Referral marketing is not a new concept, nor one that is generally well understood. Most specialists who place and restore implants understand that the bulk of their referrals will emerge from referring doctors and that they exist in a unique ecosystem of “codependence”, but there is almost no written literature on the science behind the most important tool that specialty practices have to grow their businesses. This white paper will lay out a more scientific approach to referral marketing that Levin Group has developed and been evolving for the last 36 years.

Understanding the Referral Ecosystem

Most specialty practices understand that referrals are the lifeblood of the practice. Although some have been successful with external marketing, which can be hit or miss, most specialty practices receive many of their implant referrals from referring doctors. This creates a binary set of customers for the specialty practice. First, is the patient. Patients are referred, schedule consultations and hopefully accept treatment.

Second, are the referring doctors. The referring doctors are actually the primary group of customers relative to the specialty practice. If any doubt exists, ask the question, “Would you rather lose a single patient that represented a good implant case or an “A-level” referring doctor?” The answer should be obvious. One patient may represent one good implant case. One top level referring doctor may represent \$60,000, \$80,000, \$100,000 or more of annual treatment revenue.

The challenge has been that patients are the ones who physically appear in the specialty practices and this has lulled many into believing that the patient is the customer. Specialty practices focus on good customer service, but usually target their high-level service to patients, leaving less focus on referring doctors as their true customer. This is not to suggest that specialty practices are unpleasant to referring practices. However, without the realization that they are the primary customer, their systems are not designed and developed to ensure that they also have a five-star customer service experience.

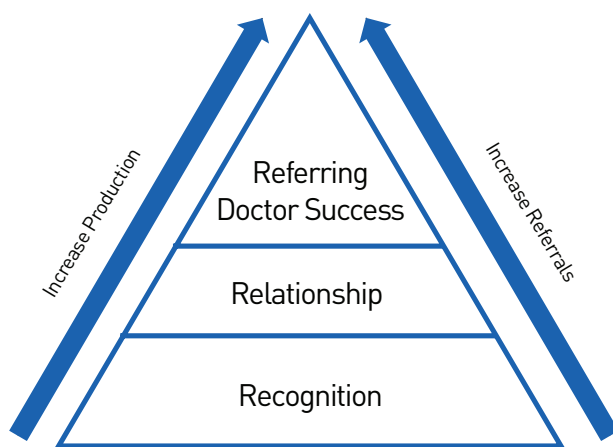
We suggest a new paradigm where referring practices, referring doctors and referring staff members are viewed as the primary customer. The foundation of referral marketing should be a five-star customer service focus on the referring practices. We will discuss how to build a five-star customer service environment in a future white paper, but for now the simplest way to understand it is that the customer is always right even when they are wrong. Customer service should be designed to delight the customer, meet all of their reasonable needs and requests and make it easy for them to refer.

Implant dentistry is a different type of referral because it goes to the heart of true interdisciplinary care. Every referral practice that sends an extraction, or patient who needs a periodontal graft, or root canal or even prosthetic case typically does not have a subsequent treatment function for those patients. The teeth will come out, the graft will be done, the root canal will be finished, and the prosthetics will be completed, and that’s it. With dental implants, it is a different scenario. Following the placement of the implants by a surgical specialist, in most cases, the referring doctor restores the final case. This has added a great deal of complication as it is true interdisciplinary care.

The Science of Referral Marketing

Over the last 36 years, Levin Group has worked with over 12,000 specialty practices. In that time, we have created, implemented and tested hundreds of strategies to increase referrals for specialists. By applying data and analyzing the results of each client practice, we were able to determine a set of principles that we now view as integral to the science of referral marketing.

The Referral Recovery Pyramid



1. The first tier of referral marketing is **Recognition**. As you can see in the figure above, recognition is the bottom rung of a three-level pyramid. Recognition simply means that referring doctors need to recognize that you are a viable practice for their referrals. Referring doctors, like all people, simply fall into habits and send their referrals to the same place until there is a reason for a change. In some cases they have a very strong bond with another specialty practice. However, in the majority of cases, it is simply a habit pattern that can be changed – but it all starts with recognition.

Recognition focuses on getting to know the referring practice on a professional level. This could include providing them information about your services, hours, technology, etc. Recognition will not be the sole factor in increasing referrals, but it does create a strong foundation where referring practices become open to the possibility of sending their patients. It is part of a marketing program that is essential and often overlooked.

2. The second tier of referral marketing is **Relationships**. Since 1985 Levin Group has built some of the biggest and best specialty practices in dentistry by creating strong and powerful relationships between a specialty practice and their referring doctors. Relationship marketing, until now, was the complete backbone of the referral marketing program simply because it worked almost every time.

Relationships are about human nature. Certainly, modern technologies from cell phones to texting to social media can play a role in enhancing relationships. However, the human nature relative to the power of relationships has not changed at all.

Referring doctors do not refer to the best specialist. They refer to the best relationship.

3. The third and newest tier of referral marketing, which was developed during the COVID-19 crisis, is **Referring Doctor Success**. This concept was designed to answer the question of how to add value for the specialty practice in the mind of the referring doctor.

That answer? Help the referring doctors recover from the pandemic. This type of approach is utilized by the most successful companies in global business. Procter & Gamble, for example, provides data and data analysis for Walmart because Walmart is the largest distributor of Procter & Gamble brands. Their belief was that if they can help Walmart be more successful, they will be more successful.

Levin Group provides this Referring Doctor Success element through an ongoing monthly program of GP practice management tools designed to help GP's recover from the crisis and build business systems that will withstand the test of time. These tools are delivered by the specialty practice, to the GP practice every two weeks. We suggest that every specialty practice that is serious about referral marketing identify ways to help referring doctors not only recover from COVID-19 but continue to grow indefinitely. We already have data demonstrating that when specialty practices deliver programming to help referring practices improve their own situation, referrals increase faster than in the past.

This combination of recognition, relationships and referring doctor success leads to increased referrals and production.

It's Not Quality vs. Quantity, It's Quality AND Quantity (and Consistency)

There are two major factors that ultimately build the foundation of successful referral marketing. The first is the quality of the strategies and the second is the quantity. Commonsense would tell most of us that having quality strategies that referring doctors like and appreciate is a good idea. However, is not as commonsensical that the quantity of strategies is equally as important. Many years of experience has proven that having 15 strategies functioning together, targeted toward referring doctors is the correct number. Having only a few high-quality strategies will not build and maintain referrals, especially in the increasingly competitive world.

Consistency is the key to keeping the referrals flowing. Every practice should develop an annual marketing calendar and execute on it exquisitely. Practices that do not plan 12 months in advance often fall off their marketing programs which leads to inconsistency, which leads to referral marketing failure.

Summary

Referral marketing, even before it was known by that name, has always been and always will be the finest way to increase referrals and referral sources. Referral marketing is a science. Any practice that wants to increase referrals and implant referrals should create a referral marketing program following the guidelines explained in this white paper. When these guidelines and principles are followed, referrals dependably increase. Not overnight, but within five- or six-months, referrals should steadily increase and continue to increase to a new much higher-level plateau.