

Applying the 7 Ps of marketing to enhance dental practice operations and success

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Abstract

In the evolving healthcare sector, dental practices face the imperative to adopt robust marketing strategies that attract and retain patients and optimize service delivery and operational efficiency. The 7 Ps of marketing—Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical evidence—constitute a comprehensive framework designed to address these multifaceted challenges. This framework not only aims to meet but exceed patient expectations, fostering practice growth and enhancing operational excellence. Each element of the 7 Ps plays a pivotal role in crafting a marketing strategy that is aligned with the core objectives of healthcare marketing and patient care standards. This commentary will analyse the application and the optimisation of the 7Ps framework in dental marketing and operational management.

Keywords: Dental; Healthcare; Marketing.

Introduction

The concept of the marketing mix, originally defined as the 4 Ps by McCarthy (1) has long guided marketing decisions across various industries. This framework was later expanded by Booms and Bitner (2) to include three additional Ps—People, Process, and Physical evidence—specifically catering to the unique challenges of service-based businesses like dental practices. In the competitive landscape of healthcare services, effective marketing strategies are crucial for the success, growth and sustainability of dental practices (3,4). This commentary explores how integrating these 7 Ps can significantly enhance the operational effectiveness and customer satisfaction in dental practices.

The 4Ps of Marketing

The 4ps (1) is a widely adopted framework across industries, which comprises Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. These elements represent the core marketing mix that companies manipulate to achieve their marketing objectives:

Product: This element involves decisions regarding the specifics of products or services the business offers. This includes not just the physical product or the professional service but also considerations of quality, design, features, packaging, warranties, and the brand itself. The product strategy is centred on meeting the identified needs and wants of consumers, ensuring the product offering is both appealing and functional.

Price: Pricing strategies are crucial as they affect how a service/product is perceived in the marketplace. Decisions in this area include setting a base list price, offering seasonal discounts, and arranging flexible payment terms or financing options. Price must reflect the value consumers perceive in the product, and it should align with the service's market positioning, competitive posture, and overall marketing objectives.

Place: Also known as the distribution strategy, this involves how the service/product is delivered to the consumer. Decisions here usually involve the selection of suppliers, distribution channels, logistics, warehouse management, and retail location. The goal is to ensure that products are available in the optimal locations at the right times in adequate quantities, enhancing convenience and driving sales.

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Figure 1. The 7 Ps of Marketing.

Promotion: This encompasses all the communication strategies a company uses to reach and engage its target audience. This includes advertising, public relations, personal selling, sales promotions, and digital marketing efforts. Effective promotion increases awareness of the product and the service, persuades potential customers of its value, and encourages purchase decisions.

The 7Ps of Marketing

The 7Ps (2) model extends the original 4Ps framework to include People, Process, and Physical Evidence (Fig.1). This expansion is particularly useful in service industries like healthcare, where direct interaction with patients and the intangible nature of service delivery significantly impact customer experience.

People: Employees and their interactions with customers fundamentally affect the perception of service quality. This P covers training, appearance, customer handling, and every human element involved in the service delivery process. Effective management of people ensures enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty (5).

Process: This refers to the actual procedures, mechanisms, and flow of activities by which services are consumed. This can include customer service processes, support systems, and other operational tasks necessary for delivering the product. Well-designed processes improve efficiency, quality of service, and customer satisfaction.

Physical Evidence: The environment in which the service is delivered and the tangible aspects that customers interact with play a significant role in shaping perceptions of the service. This can include the physical layout, signage, brochures, brand and even the digital environment. Physical evidence serves to make the service experience tangible, helping customers evaluate the service.

Together, these models provide a comprehensive blueprint for marketing and strategy decision-making. By carefully analysing and implementing strategies across all seven Ps, businesses can ensure a holistic approach to marketing that attracts customers and builds lasting relationships. These frameworks help businesses understand and adapt to the dynamic nature of consumer preferences and competitive environments, ultimately leading to sustained business success.

The 7Ps Framework applied to the dental healthcare business

Product: In dental practices, 'Product' refers to the range and quality of healthcare services offered. Services can range from general dentistry to specialized treatments such as Periodontics, Orthodontics, Endodontics and all the other dental disciplines offered at a specialist level. Each service must be clearly defined, ensuring that patients understand what they can expect and perceive high value in the care provided (6). To maintain a competitive edge, it is essential for practices to continually evaluate and expand their service offerings. This may also involve integrating the latest dental technologies and treatment methodologies, which have been demonstrated to significantly enhance treatment outcomes and patient satisfaction. For example, the adoption of digital workflow and digital patient approaches, the use of microscopes for advanced procedures, the offer of anxiety management, and sedation services not only improve the accuracy of diagnoses and treatment planning but also enhance the overall patient experience.

Price: Pricing (Fee) strategies in dental practices must reflect the quality of services, market rates, patient demographics, and insurance norms. As Kotler suggests (7) competitive pricing is crucial, yet it must also ensure sustainability and perceived value among patients, bal-

ancing affordability with premium service options. Therefore, pricing strategies within dental practices must reflect an intricate balance between perceived value and cost-effectiveness. It is essential to adopt a pricing model that reflects the quality of services provided, is acceptable to the target patient demographic, and aligns with local healthcare economic conditions (6) Flexible pricing strategies, such as tiered pricing models for different service levels and membership programs, can effectively address the diverse financial capabilities and expectations of patients. These models encourage patient loyalty and can increase the lifetime value of patients to the practice.

Place: The 'Place' involves the physical location and accessibility of the dental practice. Especially for general dental practises, the location choice can influence patient inflow significantly, increasing the percentage of "walk-in patients. An accessible location, with ample parking and public transport availability, enhances patient convenience and increases clinic visits for both general and specialist practises. Furthermore, in today's digital age, virtual accessibility, through a robust online presence encompassing appointment booking systems, tele-dentistry consultations, and patient portals, is equally important. Practices must ensure their online interfaces are user-friendly and that their physical locations are welcoming and easy to navigate.

Promotion: Effective promotion strategies are essential to attract and retain patients. This includes traditional advertising, digital marketing, community outreach, and patient referral programs. Promotional efforts should focus on building brand awareness and showcasing the practice's unique services and patient care quality (7). Traditional methods such as print advertisements, community event sponsorships, and local networking are valuable for building local awareness. However, the digital landscape offers expansive opportunities through SEO (8), social media marketing (9), and email campaigns, which can target specific demographics with personalized messaging. Furthermore, content marketing, through educational blogs and videos, can help in establishing the practice as a thought leader in dental care. These combined efforts should aim to create a cohesive brand image and communicate the unique value proposition of the practice effectively.

People: People are central to the service delivery in dental practices, encompassing all staff members from the receptionists to the dental hygienists and dentists themselves. As Booms and Bitner highlight (2), the competence and behaviour of personnel directly impact customer/patient satisfaction and loyalty. The calibre of interactions between the staff and the patients fundamentally shapes the patient experience and can influence patient loyalty and referrals. It is crucial for dental practices to invest in hiring skilled professionals and to foster a culture of continuous learning and empathy. Regular training programs that focus on both clinical advancements and service excellence can empower staff to deliver superior patient care and handle patient interactions with professionalism and warmth (10).

Process: The 'Process' involves the patient flow and service delivery operations within the practice. This includes appointment scheduling, waiting times, the treatment process itself, and follow-up care. Efficient processes reduce wait times, improve patient satisfaction, and enhance the overall efficiency of the practice. Operational efficiency in dental practices is paramount

to patient satisfaction. Practices should invest in efficient scheduling software, employ effective patient flow management strategies, and adopt standardized procedures to enhance productivity and reduce errors. Automation of routine tasks, such as appointment reminders and patient follow-ups, can free up staff to focus more on patient care and less on administrative duties.

Physical Evidence: Physical evidence is critical in a healthcare setting like a dental clinic. This includes the cleanliness of the facility, the modernity of the equipment, and the comfort of the waiting and treatment areas. Such elements create a tangible testament to the quality of care patients can expect to receive. The physical environment of a dental practice serves as a tangible representation of the quality of care provided. Modern, well-maintained facilities equipped with the latest dental technology not only reassure patients of the professional standards of the practice but also contribute to a more pleasant and comforting visit. Attention to detail in the practice's ambience, cleanliness, and the comfort provided in treatment areas can significantly affect patient perceptions and their overall experience.

Strategic Application and Continuous Improvement

To effectively implement these principles, it is crucial for dental practices to engage in ongoing market research and regular review of strategic and operational plans to understand evolving patient needs and preferences. Setting clear marketing objectives, regularly reviewing the performance of each element of the marketing mix, and adapting strategies based on patient feedback and market dynamics are essential practices. This proactive approach ensures that the dental practice remains aligned with its strategic goals and responsive to the healthcare market's demands.

Challenges and Opportunities

While integrating the 7 Ps offers numerous benefits, challenges such as budget constraints, resistance to change among staff, or market saturation can impede implementation. However, addressing these challenges with strategic planning and staff engagement can lead to successful marketing initiatives that enhance practice growth and patient satisfaction (11).

Conclusion

Integrating the 7 Ps into the marketing strategy of a dental practice offers a robust framework for addressing the unique challenges

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