

Finding Your Direction with Direct Mail

by Shawn Rowbotham

Shawn Rowbotham has been doing marketing and sales for more than 30 years. Rowbotham has been owner, founder and partner in seven different organizations, including marketing and sales companies, advertising agencies and a market research firm. He currently is a partner at OrthodonticMarketing.net and Gargle.com, sister companies that serve the dental industry. Email: shawn@orthodonticmarketing.net



The answers to your questions about how, when, where and more



After spending decades in marketing for orthodontic practices, I've seen some surprising results. I've also seen some that are not so surprising, and some that are outright difficult to believe. Some candid answers to the most commonly asked questions about direct mail marketing will hopefully provide insight and help save you from at least some of the (often expensive and painful) lessons we've learned.

How do I best target my mailings to reach the right prospective patients?

First, do some analysis of your market area. A good market analysis will show you many factors that, over time, have affected your practice naturally and from a practical standpoint. You can gain some great insights by learning where your patients are and how far they'll drive to see you, and you'll also learn what demographics your practice is attracting and how that relates to your objectives. Armed with good data, you can make better decisions to get the most out of your marketing efforts and not waste money marketing to the wrong prospect. Your practice focus—youth, adults or both—also makes a difference.

I've heard postcards can be effective, but which areas do they work in?

Overall, postcard campaigns have been successful for our clients, averaging five times or more return on investment (ROI). "Where" the postcards work is rarely the issue, because they can work well anywhere, but data shows that orthodontists get higher ROI in smaller towns and less densely populated areas than they typically would in densely populated big cities. The bigger issues that drive success or failure are answering the phones, how the staff handles the calls and, especially, the patient experience with the practice. Of course, things like offers and competitive environment affect calls, but a smart practice can still thrive in very competitive environments and not have to use overly aggressive offers.

We've seen amazing results targeting new move-ins with direct mail campaigns. (Be cautious in your approach, though, and do your research so you don't get taken to the cleaners. Some providers cost up to \$1–\$2 per household, but you

can spend a fraction of that and still use a better program.) New move-in mailers will grow your practice and are easy to target effectively. Some stats:

- 14 percent of people move every year; over the past 20 years that number has varied from 12 percent to 17 percent.
- You are 80 times more likely to convert a new move-in into a new patient than an existing homeowner.
- During their first six months in a home, new movers spend six times the money that existing homeowners do.

Of the countless marketing options you hear about, mailing to new move-ins should be right after having a sign and being on the internet. These prospects are the best opportunities to add new patients to your practice.

How do I transcend incentive promotions in direct mail campaigns?

Brace yourself, because I promised you honest answers. You don't ever transcend incentive promotions. Simply put, we all need an incentive for virtually everything we do. Why would you do anything without one?

We get this question all the time. It's really just the wrong question. Better questions would be:

- How do I incentivize someone to choose my practice and maintain the right value perception and confidence in it?
- How do I properly set the stage for them to become a longtime patient and have a great experience?

Focus on differentiators that are meaningful and valuable to the patient. Have enough confidence and expertise to be able to consistently provide quality service. If you don't have any differentiators in mind, start thinking out of the box. Consider the following:

- Why would you choose you over another practice?
- How can you convey those great reasons in a succinct way that resonates with your target prospects?
- Could you provide a guarantee that sets you apart?
- Could you add concrete benefits that build your value proposition and make you the obvious choice?

Your prospective patients want to make the best choice; you just need to make it easy and obvious.



10 tips for maximizing direct mail design

Shawn Rowbotham dissects the design of a typical direct-mail postcard and discusses what could be done differently to improve response. To read this article, visit orthotown.com/direct-mail-design.

If I give something away in my direct mail campaign, won't I look desperate or like a cut-rate provider, and attract the wrong type of patient?

Think of the last Lexus or Mercedes commercial you've seen. They offer thousands of dollars off their products all the time. Do you find yourself thinking they're desperate or have an inferior product because of it? You may feel that's "different," but I think there's something to be learned from it. The prospect's perceptions are going to be shaped and established more often and more significantly by other things. How the practice looks and feels to them is, in large measure, primarily based on how they interact with and are treated by your orthodontic team and how your brand is conveyed throughout the patient experience. With direct mail, you are able to use offers effectively to create a motivation in the prospect to book an appointment and not have the offer negatively affect their perception of the practice.

How will my direct mail campaigns thrive when so many dentists in my area have turned into my competition?

You definitely have to try harder. Gone are the days of "If you build it, they will come" (and be referred to you). Now you have to be proactive and increasingly dedicated to your practice marketing if you truly want to thrive. The good news is that not only is it possible, it's really not that difficult. That said, it does take significant and consistent effort and determination to differentiate yourself, make it easy for patients to see why you are their best choice and, most importantly, provide a great patient experience.

Bottom line: There are good ways for orthodontists like you to market that get great return on your investment, don't break the bank and don't take up all your time. Direct mail marketing works when you have direction. It's worth finding the right direct mail partner to grow your practice, and it can be done while keeping your peace of mind. ■

