

Opportunity Abounds: Are You Ready for the Patient Onslaught?

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Toronto-based [Gartner Canada](#) keeps its finger on the pulse of “universal” marketing trends, irrespective of niche or industry. Every year, their team of global researchers and analysts survey Chief Marketing Officers on their “spend and strategy.” These findings inform recommendations to be incorporated into organizations’ broader strategies from year to year. In a recent [announcement](#), five predictions were made about what’s ahead for marketing in 2023. In short, researchers inferred from the CMO spend- and strategy-related data that:

1. [Artificial Intelligence](#) will assert greater influence on marketing and strategic decision-making.
2. Conveying authenticity and combating misinformation will play a more significant role in overall marketing strategies.

3. Communications as “entertainment” (harnessing influence-makers) will be increasingly valued in 2023 and beyond.
4. Intentional loyalty-minded initiatives and programs will be essential to retaining “high-priority” consumers (patients).
5. Back to the first prediction, there will be greater awareness around highly scrutinized and carefully deployed AI in an effort to combat rising concerns around unscrupulous and invasive machine learning and automation.

As experts in healthcare communications, we see the relevancy of these trends, innovations, and shifts to our valued clients in the dental practice “space.”

No. 1: AI “grows up” – and what that means for your office.

Long gone are the days of unsophisticated, tedious, and non-intuitive early-generation “[chatbots](#).” Dental technologists encourage dentists and practice leadership to update their perception of AI. They highlight at least five substantive, high-value applications in dentistry. All of these applications are linked to maintaining or bolstering one’s “brand.” By harnessing efficient and intuitive AI, you can endear first-timers as well as long-termers or “frequent-fliers” to your office. These experience and relationship boosting applications include:

- Consumer-facing practice management; for instance, “contactless” facial and voice recognition services
- Diagnostics and treatment planning that leverages precision medicine
- Dental restoration and oral appliance therapy design, quality control, and colour-matching
- Patient monitoring and tracking
- Efficient insurance and claims verification and processing

No. 2: Cultivate your practice’s “realness.”

We have long been pounding the drum of *authenticity*. As savvy healthcare consumers continue to [crave the “real deal,”](#) it is much easier for those practices who have established trust through genuine communications to fight “fake news” and false information. Their “fans” and “advocates” (existing patients, peers, and communities) will quickly pick up on inconsistencies and will sense the “red flags” when reading between the lines of misinformation. As a refresher, we encourage practices to:

- Never lose sight of the power of the consumer (patient). Resist the urge to put staff credentials or the latest “gee whiz” technology before the patient. A super-satisfied patient’s success story or results speaks volumes. Showcase that “human touch.”
- Revisit your brand promise. Do this periodically. Assess: “What do my patients expect of me? What is our ‘DNA’? The ‘core’ of what we do?” When having these periodic heart-to-hearts, you may find your messaging is straying from that promise, core, or DNA.
- Project what your practice “wants to be when it grows up.” Ensure all marketing efforts and communications are consistent, align with your goals, and also jibe with your unique style and “voice.”
- The more feedback, the better. Your team may *think* they know what their patients want, and that is wholly distinguished from what *patients may actually want and think*. Since communications flow from these perceptions, a disconnect between patients’ expectations and practice promises can arise. Your message will not resonate with patients; worse yet, you may seem completely out of touch with their needs.
- Provide value and teach! This is where dentists can really shine. And fortunately, it also stands out as the closest thing to a silver bullet toward authentic marketing that resonates and does not turn people off. Many consumers may think, for instance, that they brush well or know how “veneers work.” The reality is they may be plagued by long-held bad habits or misperceptions based on erroneous or questionable online information. These are all opportunities to demonstrate your authority and credibility and to further build your presence in the community and beyond as a “thought leader.”
- When showcasing the “new,” focus on clearly conveying the *benefits*, not those *features* that you think are really cool. An easy way to accomplish this is to consider and answer the following questions when introducing a new service, technology, or capability: “How will ___ make my patient’s life better? How does ___ make this treatment, etc., easier? How will ___ make the experience at our practice more pleasant?” Keep these answers in mind throughout the process of writing up and delivering collateral related to product debuts or innovations. These benefits breed authenticity and grab and hold the patient’s attention.

No. 3: The serious value of not being so serious.

If you haven’t embraced the value of thinking beyond traditional sources, platforms, and ways of conveying information about your practice, now is the time to do so, finally! Strike a balance between authenticity, consistency, and eye-catching and entertaining content. An example of this process in motion could be as simple as reconstituting your website’s usual “before and after” photos into videos on high-traffic social channels that showcase dramatic transformations or your

best work. You may even wish to engage with local celebrities or partners-cum-influencers with a strong following in the social realm. Their influence and effervescence, combined with your authority and expertise, can make for a memorable and high-impact relationship. And do not be afraid to inject some (tasteful) humour, fun, and personality into your multi-media efforts.

No. 4: The rewards of rewarding (and insightful) loyalty programs.

We encourage you to view this persistently buzzy marketing development through the lens of:

- Promotions – The possibilities are endless! Patients who return for 6-month appointments may be eligible for everything from complimentary teeth whitening “touch-ups” to discounts on certain cosmetic or preventative services. Or, you could enter patients whose referrals translate to new patients into raffles for higher-ticket items, such as a quality “power” or “smart” toothbrush.
- Membership plans – You may wish to tout in-house dental savings plans as alternatives to the limitations, unpredictability, and nasty surprises that can plague some traditional dental insurance plans. These plans may cover preventive services and provide discounts on other services to keep patients returning to your office for the care they need or want.

Additionally, many rewards, membership, loyalty, or discount programs have the added perk of providing [considerable insights](#) into the enrollee or member patient. This information can then be used to personalize services, care, and the office experience in a way that further endears you and your team to the patient. After all, you know what they like and can accommodate their preferences and personal characteristics accordingly.

No. 5: We end where we started ... think: *ethical AI*.

As discussed earlier, Artificial Intelligence presents an undeniable “trend.” When finding ways to automate or leverage intuitive machines, we simply encourage our clients to apply the same savvy and integrity they use when doing “what they do best” as clinicians in the operating or treatment room.

As AI evolves and becomes increasingly omnipresent and potentially invasive, the onus will fall on the provider or leader leveraging the technology or tech vendor to know exactly how that tool is being used and its [potential implications](#). You do not want a poorly-considered tool to destroy the trust and loyalty built on irreplaceable face-to-face interactions over months, years, or even decades.

Dentists are generally great at differentiating between the flashy bells and whistles that have little real substance and the innovations that are truly in the long-term best interests of their team and the patients of both today and tomorrow. They do so on the therapeutic and diagnostic front and should now bring this level of discretion to innovations designed to build awareness of the practice “brand” and to draw loyal patients who will then be their best “brand ambassadors.”

About the Author:



Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of [Ekwa Marketing](https://www.ekwa.com), has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dentists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you’re looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy session with Naren. You may also schedule a session at your convenience with the Senior Director of Marketing – Lila, by clicking <https://www.ekwa.com/msm/> or simply send a text to 313-777-8494.