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Revista de Cercetare si Interventie sociala

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2018, vol. 63, pp. 346-358

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Published by:
Expert Projects Publishing House



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Department of Sociology and Social Work
and
HoltIS Association

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA
is indexed by Clarivate Analytics (Web of Science) -
Social Sciences Citation Index
(Sociology and Social Work Domains)

Marketing in Dentistry: Opinion Survey on Promotion of the Dental Office

Elena Mihaela CARAUSU¹, Cristina Gena DASCALU², Iulian Costin LUPU³,
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Abstract

The image of the dental offices and their promotion has acquired an important role in creating an identity and in developing the praxis. Along with the increasing dental services market also appeared a strong need for differentiation of dental offices/dental clinics. The study has set the goal of identifying the main promotion means and methods used in many of dental offices/dental clinics faced with the negative effects of economic crisis such as the reduction of the budget and the significant erosion of profits. The study group included 360 subjects, graduates and young dentists, aged between 25 and 34, of which 183 (50.83%) female and 177 (49.17%) male gender. In terms of qualification, 186 (53.30%) of those surveyed are graduates, and 174 (46.70%) are young dentists with licence to practise. The tool used was an opinion survey, whose questions wanted to be relevant to the research aim and objectives. The opinion survey was conducted from April 2016 to May 2017. The competition that currently exists in the dental market has led to differentiation of dental offices/ dental clinics and to creating an identity for each one of them. The image of the dental office/ dental clinic and institutional visual

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identity influence the first impression that the patient remembers and ultimately its “business card”. The efficiency and success in dentistry are mainly the result of the quality of dental services and patient satisfaction. This depends on the dentist’s professional training and on the endowment with modern and quality equipment of the dental office. Optimizing dentist-patient relationship has become important because it determines the professional and financial success on a medium and long term.

Keywords: marketing, dentistry, visual identity, health information, impact.

Introduction

The economic crisis of recent years and the competition on the Romanian dental services market has led to a significant increase in the interest of dentists for the management and marketing in dentistry. “For a dental practice to grow and attract new patients, it must offer a competitive product at competitive prices, along with convenient and quality services - all supported by a solid marketing plan” (Kent & Jackson, 2012). Due to numerous constraints, promotion of the dental office/ dental clinic should be done in accordance with existing laws (Ministry of Health, 2017). Thus the Deontological Code of Dentists, limits and standardizes the way a dental office/ dental clinic can promote their activity and advertise their services. Art. 29 suport the principle that “the reputation of the dentist should be based on competence and dignity, without the contribution of advertising, and the dental professions should not be practiced as a commercial activity”. Thus it was decided that the street advertise and the ones on the dental office door must have a standardized content which should include only the information about: a) the logo of Romanian College of Dentists; b) form of organization / name of the dental office/dental clinic; c) the dentist’s full name and its professional degree (optional). Also, art. 30(1) states that: “in a directory, or in other publications or on websites only the following information is allowed to occur: a) the dentist’s full name or phone number; b) specialization/competence, its professional degree; c) the address, fax number and schedule of visits to the dental office/ dental clinic” (College of Dentists, 2010). The dentist can use simple and inexpensive methods and techniques of dental marketing to promote a dental office/ dental clinic. Among them, we can point out the institutional visual identity, which includes all methods and means whose application allows a dental office/ dental clinic to stand out, in terms of visual competition (<http://www.patientnews.com>).

Besides the differentiating factors, visual identity is intended to convey to potential patients/ customers a visual display on the main features of the dental office/ dental clinic and through which they are different from other competitors

(Clarkson & Bhatia, 2008). Achieving proper visual identity a dental office/ dental clinic must meet all the following requirements: (1) to stand out; (2) not to be confused with other visual identities from the branch and allow a clear distinction from the visual identity of the collaborating institutions with which they may be associated, in terms of the activity they perform; (3) ensure quick memorization; (4) allow easy reproduction of the components that form the visual identity; (5) be free from excess, in terms of colours and graphics; (6) convey the rational benefits in an understandable way. Identity elements represent the business card of the dental office/ dental clinic which ensures an easy identification and immediate recognition (Richard, 2009). The visual identity first determines the stability and also the coherent and consistent medium and long term development of a true-positive and honest image of the dental office/ dental clinic concerned. This approach is significantly reflected in dentist's image and is also one of the important steps in promoting and building a proper and successful patient-dentist relationship. Also, the image of a private dental practice has a particular role in anticipating of the patient to the range of services offered by their status, type of care, professional conduct of dentist and not least, to the cost/ benefits ratio.

Methodology

The study has set the goal of identifying the main promotion means and methods used in many of the dental offices/dental clinics faced with the negative effects of economic crisis such budget cuts and the significant erosion of profits. To achieve its purpose, the study has the following objectives: (1) Identify means and methods used to promote the dental office/dental clinic under current regulations; (2) Assess the dentist's awareness on the importance of the image, identity and differentiation of the dental office/dental clinic in a highly competitive environment; (3) Identify methods of presentation of a treatment plan that dentists consider effective and which they apply; (4) Identify professional communication components used in the dental office/dental clinic that can lead to an effective dentist-patient communication; (5) Evaluation of the dentist's awareness about the importance of quality services.

To achieve the goal and objectives set above, the type of study used was the opinion survey. The study covered two stages: (1) A preliminary phase which included: the documentary study that aimed to clarify the main theoretical aspects of visual identity on the dental office/dental clinic and stage of drafting the survey (which ran from April to May 2017); (2) The actual investigation, which was conducted from May 2017 to May 2018, and included data collection, statistical processing, analysis and the results interpretation.

Participants

The study group included 360 subjects, graduates and young dentists, aged between 25 and 34, of which 183 (50.83%) female and 177 (49.17%) male gender (*Figure 1a*). In terms of qualification, 186 (53.30%) of those surveyed are graduates, and 174 (46.70%) are young dentists with licence to practice, activating in other offices and wishing that in the near future they could open their own dental office/dental clinic (*Figure 1b*).

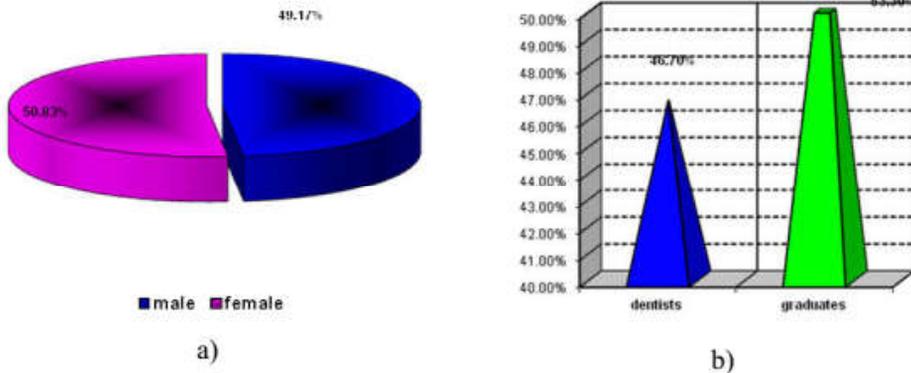


Figure 1. Structure of the study group: a) according to gender; b) according to respondents' qualifications

Data collection

The main tool used was an opinion survey whose questions wanted to be relevant to the research objectives. In the opinion survey, the questionnaire was presented and explained to each subject separately, along with the research objectives. Our questionnaire included two types of questions: (1) With open answer- with which one intends to find out the opinions of the people questioned; (2) Items / questions whose answers were assessed using scales of *Likert with 3 "x" steps* that have been used to identify to what extent the study respondents know and use the methods, means and techniques related to promoting identity and differentiation in the dental office/ dental clinic in a highly competitive environment.

Variables

The qualification and gender were considered as *independent variables*. The answers of the questionnaire items have been taken as *dependent variables*.

Statistical analysis

Data from the questionnaires were inputted to SPSS version 19.0 (SPSS, Inc., USA). In order to perform the statistical processing of data and statistical analysis we used descriptive and inferential statistics. We used the Pearson Chi square test (χ^2) to evaluate the statistical significance of differences; the statistical significance was considered at p value less than 0.05.

Ethical statement

The participation in our study was voluntary. The subjects were informed about the study, the content of the questionnaire and signed the informed consent. The study was approved by the Institutional Committee of Research Ethics.

Results and Discussions

From the answers provided by respondents to the open questions, in the first part of the questionnaire, we identified several important variables which were afterwards analysed. From the synthesis of responses on methods preferred/used by respondents to promote the dental office/dental clinic it follows that (*Table 1 and 2*): (1) The majority of the respondents recognize the importance of promoting for any dental office/ dental clinic on the market; (2) Promotion by IT technology using their websites and pages on various social networks has the highest share in the preferences of the respondents; (3) Also frequently used are direct recommendation of former patients, flyers, business cards; flyers are used mainly for graduates; (4) Graduates use more promotions to motivate patients than dentists, promotions carried out directly in the dental office; (5) Female subjects give greater importance to direct marketing methods using personal cards frequently.

Table 1. Methods used to promote the dental office/dental clinic- by qualification

Method	Qualification				χ^2 (Degrees of Liberty = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Graduates		Dentists		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Direct recommendation (former patients)	123	34.17	165	45.83	46.2764	p<0.0001	SS
Outdoor advertising	42	11.67	18	5.00	9.6908	p=0.001852	SS
Business card	153	42.50	81	22.50	2.0877	p=0.148491	NS
Flyers	185	51.39	79	21.94	134.3516	p<0.0001	SS

Promotions	183	50.83	87	24.17	112.2581	p<0.0001	SS
Web page	184	51.11	167	46.39	2.9895	p=0.083804	NS
Social page (Facebook)	182	50.55	162	45.00	4.7681	p=0.028992	SS

Table 2. Methods used to promote the dental office/dental clinic- by gender

Method	Gender				χ^2 (Degrees of Liberty = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Male		Female		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Direct recommendation (former patients)	117	32.50	171	47.50	42.0367	p<0.00001	SS
Outdoor advertising	27	7.50	33	9.17	0.5001	p=0.479439	NS
Business card	75	20.83	159	44.17	78.3613	p<0.00001	SS
Flyers	117	32.50	153	42.50	14.7041	p=0.000126	SS
Promotions	93	25.83	177	49.17	93.6593	p<0.00001	SS
Web page	170	49.17	181	50.27	3.0233	p=0.082074	NS
Social page (Facebook)	165	45.83	180	50.00	5.9538	p=0.014685	SS

Communicating to the patients the treatment plan and the possible treatment options are important aspects of marketing in dental medicine. Delivering information to patients and setting expectations is an enormous opportunity in how patients view their outcomes and proceed through the process (<https://www.ama.org/>). Treatment planning helps patients understand the relationships between oral health, occlusion, temporo-mandibular joint function and systemic health. Dentists inform patients of ever-changing treatment options. Understanding treatment options allows patients to make better, informed choices (Valcea *et al.*, 2016). More options lead to a higher level of care and more comprehensive dental treatment. Informed patients simply have better outcomes. Patients who know what to expect tend to be less dissatisfied, and rant less in the dental office (<https://getreferralmd.com/2015>). Summary of responses concerning the methods/ preferred means/ used by respondents to present the proposed treatment plan and therapeutic solutions to patients are presented in *Table 3* and *Table 4*.

Table 3. The main methods used to present the treatment plan- by qualification

Method:	Qualification				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Graduates		Dentists		χ^2	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Orally (comparisons)	184	51.11	173	48.06	0.2726	p=0.060161	NS
Adapting the medical terms	183	50.83	173	48.06	0.8819	p=0.347688	NS
Models	111	30.83	159	44.17	48.1869	p<0.00001	SS
Drawings (sketches)	177	49.17	126	35.00	34.9072	p<0.00001	SS

Boards, pictures, images	180	50.00	150	41.67	13.1419	p=0.000289	SS
Internet	185	51.39	115	31.94	72.0801	p<0.00001	SS
Video presentations	177	49.17	105	29.17	64.2082	p<0.00001	SS

Table 4. The main methods used to present the treatment plan- by gender

Method:	Gender				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Male		Female		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Orally (comparisons)	174	48.33	182	50.55	1.0801	p=0.298681	NS
Adapting the medical terms	171	47.50	181	50.28	2.1847	p=0.139388	NS
Models	96	26.67	174	48.33	116.9809	p<0.00001	SS
Drawings (sketches)	132	36.67	171	47.50	24.0317	p<0.00001	SS
Boards, pictures, images	174	48.33	162	45.00	13.8324	p=0.0002	SS
Internet	144	40.00	156	43.33	0.9803	p=0.322132	NS
Video presentations	102	28.33	180	50.00	87.9604	p<0.00001	SS

From data analysis one can see that: (1) In current practice, the majority of graduates and dentists attached great importance to the treatment plan presentation and therapeutic solutions; (2) Subjects surveyed used different methods / means (both classic and modern) for presentation of the of treatment plan and therapeutic solutions proposed; the majority of respondents believes that an oral presentation of the treatment plan, using a medical language adapted to each patient is sufficient; regardless of gender or qualifications, most of the respondents prefer to present the treatment plan orally, directly to the patient; also in verbal communication, young dentists frequently resort to comparisons with various aspects of everyday life to make it more understandable to patients; (3) Graduates frequently use additional methods / means (drawings, sketches) to explain to patients the treatment plan and the proposed therapeutic solution; the female subjects frequently use helping methods to explain the proposed treatment plan to the patients.

Nowadays, marketing and media have become an essential part of organizational growth- even for dental medicine practices. More and more people have transitioned to seeking health information on the web, including dental health information (Keckley & Hoffman, 2010). In 2013, the Report of Pew Research Center states that “72% of internet users said they looked online for health information within the past year” (Fox & Maeve, 2013). That means dentists, physicians, practices and hospitals, need to “keep up with times” and establish an online web presence. If not, they might be out of a job in no time (Thielst, 2010). The Web marketing platforms can generate exposure of the dental medicine practices (Lupu, Carausu,

& Forna, 2014) and the type of services they offer by allowing patients and other referring physicians and dentists to find you on the top pages of web search engines (Lupu, Gherman, & Carausu, 2012).

From the presentation pattern of answers to the questions about the impact that the first impression has on the patient about the dental office/ dental clinic, the following aspects can be established: (1) For the majority of the respondents, the patient's first impression about the dental office/ clinic is the most important; (2) From *Figure 2a* one can see that graduates put greater emphasis on first impressions, compared to the dentists interviewed; in our study there are subjects who believe first impression has an insignificant impact (3.33% of male respondents consider that the first impression is not significant to the patient); (3) *Figure 2b* shows that the majority of female respondents believe that the first impression about the dental office/ dental clinic is important to the patient.

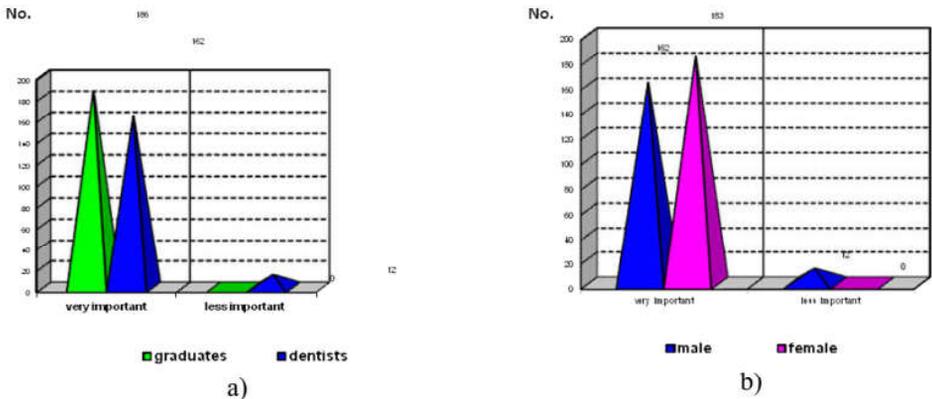


Figure 2. The importance of patients' first impression about the dental office/dental clinic: a) by qualification; b) by gender

For justification of their answer, the questioned subjects gave arguments such as: (1) It is the first contact with the patient and it is important for them to form a positive opinion; (2) It is the image that the patient is left with; if they leave the dental office with a negative impression it is possible for that patient to be a lost one; (3) The first impression is virtually a "business card" of the dental office/dental clinic and even of the dentist. From the submission of responses to the question on the main elements a patient retained at first impression of the dental office/dental clinic (*Table 5 and 6*), we see that: (1) The emphasis is on team attitude, on how to approach the patient, on appearance and overall atmosphere of the office/clinic dental, on professional clothing; (2) For a positive impression all the aspects listed above should be taken into account, but for the vast majority of respondents (both female and male gender) the following aspects are important: team attitude, the approach toward the patient and the atmosphere of the dental office; these issues

have a roughly equal share for graduates and young dentists; (3) Following the detailed *feed-back* of the subjects, the appearance of the dental office should be neat, clean, airy, and the atmosphere of the cabinet should be calm and quiet; (4) Although for the subjects surveyed, clothing does not occupy an important place, it forms part of the factors remembered by the patient at first impression of the dental office/dental clinic; the majority of subjects who mentioned this element specified that it would be helpful the professional outfit to be composed of a uniform (trousers, robe) and special shoes.

Table 5. The main elements taken into account by patients at first impression of the dental office/ dental clinic (by qualification)

Items tracked:	Qualification				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Graduates		Dentists		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Team attitude	183	50.83	173	48.05	0.8819	p=0.347688	NS
The atmosphere in the dental office	96	26.67	84	23.33	0.4004	p=0.52686	NS
Politeness	180	50.00	168	46.67	0.0138	p=0.09064	NS
The appearance of the dental office	84	23.33	87	24.17	0.844	p=0.358242	NS
Professional outfit	30	8.33	84	23.33	42.934	p<0.00001	SS
The approach to the patient	102	28.33	126	35.00	11.9578	p=0.000544	SS

Table 6. The main elements taken into account by patients at first impression of the dental office/ dental clinic (by gender)

Items tracked:	Gender				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Male		Female		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Team attitude	175	48.61	180	50.00	0.1705	p=0.679695	NS
The atmosphere in the dental office	87	24.17	93	25.83	0.10	p=0.751796	NS
Politeness	174	48.33	171	47.50	5.3276	p=0.02991	SS
The appearance of the dental office	90	25.00	81	22.50	1.5646	p=0.210994	NS
Professional outfit	75	20.83	39	10.83	18.4443	p=0.000017	SS
The approach to the patient	132	36.67	96	26.67	18.9531	p=0.000013	SS

Summary of responses to the question on the methods used by respondents to keep in touch with the patient after completion of dental treatment is presented in *Table 7 and 8 and Figure 3.*

Table 7. Main methods used by respondents to keep in touch with the patient after completion of dental treatment (by qualification)

Methods:	Qualification				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical significance
	Graduates		Dentists		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Ticket	144	40.00	126	35.00	1.2013	p=0.273055	NS
Call from the nurse	33	9.17	27	7.50	0.3204	p=0.571394	NS
E-mail	21	5.83	12	3.33	2.0844	p=0.148812	NS

Table 8. Main methods used by respondents to keep in touch with the patient after completion of dental treatment (by gender)

Methods:	Gender				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Male		Female		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Ticket	117	32.50	153	42.50	14.7041	p=0.000126	SS
Call from the nurse	24	6.67	36	10.00	2.4207	p=0.119744	NS
E-mail	15	4.17	18	5.00	0.2003	p=0.654474	NS

Analysing the answers we see the following: (1) The programming ticket holds the largest share, then the phone given by the nurse; (2) Most of those interviewed said that in practice they combine the first two methods (at the end of the dental treatment the patient receives a programming ticket and a few days before the patient is called to reconfirm it); (3) Because most elderly patients do not have access to technology, doctors cannot use e-mail.

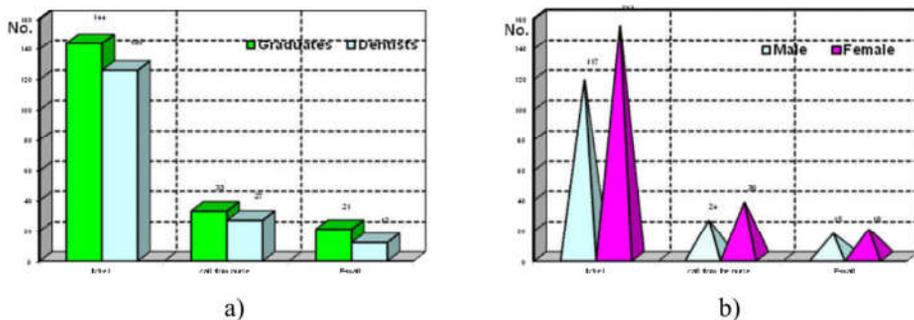


Figure 3. Methods used to keep in touch with the patient after completion of dental treatment: a) by qualification; b) by gender

Table 9 and 10 display the synthesis of responses to questions about the methods used by respondents for the dentist-patient relationship optimization.

Table 9. Methods used by respondents to optimize the dentist patient relationship

Methods	Qualification				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Graduates		Dentists		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Forms of address	96	26.67	48	13.33	21.624	p<0.00001	SS
Follow-up	60	16.67	54	15.00	0.0622	p=0.803052	NS
Session revalidation	9	2.50	45	12.50	31.164	p<0.00001	SS
Motivating patients (bonuses, free samples)	39	10.83	15	4.17	10.7492	p=0.001043	SS
Patient Satisfaction Questionnaire	0	0.00	6	1.67	-	-	-

Table 10. Methods used by respondents to optimize the dentist patient relationship

Methods	Gender				Pearson's χ^2 (Degrees of Freedom = 1)		Statistical Significance
	Male		Female		χ^2_c	p value	
	No.	%	No.	%			
Forms of address	69	19.17	75	20.83	0.15	p=0.698496	NS
Follow-up	63	8.33	51	14.17	2.4809	p=0.115235	NS
Session revalidation	12	3.33	42	11.67	18.4541	p=0.000017	SS
Motivating patients (bonuses, free samples)	33	9.17	21	5.83	0.6265	p=0.056866	NS
Patient Satisfaction Questionnaire	0	0.00	6	1.67	-	-	-

From data presented in *Table 9 and 10* we see that: (1) 40.00% of the interviewed consider that forms of address are the most important; (2) 31.67% of the interviewees think the follow-up plays an important role in the dentist-patient relationship; (3) 15.00% believe that revalidation comes first and 15.00% still believe that motivating the patient with various bonuses and free samples creates a better relationship with them; (4) Only 1.67% of the interviewed consider important filling in the patient satisfaction survey on the received dental care.

Conclusions

The dental office/ dental clinic is the framework of the dentists' professional activities, so for the majority of the respondents it is important the way it is promoted, especially in this period negatively influenced, on the one hand by the economic crisis and on the other hand by the highly competitive market environment in dental services. The competition that currently exists in the dental market has led to differentiation of dental offices/dental clinics and to creation of an identity for each one of them. The image of the dental office/dental clinic and institutional visual identity influence the first impression that the patient remembers, and ultimately its "business card". A clear visual identity is hugely important when creating a brand for a dental office/dental clinic. A visual identity is a combination of logo, typeface, colors and words that represent a dental office/dental clinic's services and values. The visual identity should be clear, uncluttered and unique to office/dental clinic brand's identity. The office/dental clinic logo, website, offices and social media channels are all a part of office/dental clinic brand's visual identity.

The efficiency and success in dentistry are mainly the result of the quality of dental services and patient satisfaction. This depends on the dentists' professional training of and dental office endowment with modern and quality equipment. Optimizing dentist-patient relationship has become important because it determines the professional and financial success on a medium and long term. Oral communication is the main way of presenting the plan of treatment and therapeutic solutions suggested. In second place stands the use of specialized leaflets, posters and pictures. Young dentists do not consider important to present the treatment by using technology (soft or video presentations) arguing that the time is relatively short and consider sufficient an oral presentation and possibly the use of drawings or parts of the cabinet that could help exhibiting the treatment plan and the suggested therapeutic solutions.

Acknowledgments

All authors have an equal contribution to the study.

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