

Relationship Marketing: the use of digital strategies in Dentistry

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to analyze the digital strategies known and used by Dental Surgeons in relation to Relationship Marketing. **Material and Methods:** this is a quantitative, descriptive, documentary, field and cross-sectional research. The research was performed through a standard e-mail sent to Dental Surgeons of the State of Santa Catarina, containing a link to the questionnaire and the Informed Consent Term. **Results:** after the data collection period, 31 electronic questionnaires answered by the Dental Surgeons were analyzed, outlining a predominant profile of the study participants containing more often young, white and single women, with some type of post-graduation, varying from 1 to 4 years of training, generally being owners of the place where they work, with more than one employment relationship. The digital strategies most known by the participants were Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Websites. In turn, the most used were Facebook and Instagram, and a significant percentage reported not using any digital strategy. **Conclusion:** dentists from Santa Catarina presented little knowledge about the definition of Relationship Marketing and digital strategies. Although the most reported digital media have been Facebook and Instagram for the purpose of improvement and communication, the same media have been little used for Relationship Marketing actions.

Keywords: Marketing; Dentistry; Dental legislation.

Introduction

Numerous and evident transformations have been taking place in contemporary society, due to the accelerated advances of technologies, new relations and forms of communication, high connectivity, as well as the expansion of a new vision of the conscience of dental work. Through reflection and understanding of the importance of marketing within the practice, some professionals perceive its assistance in attracting new clients and narrowing the relationship with them, creating loyalty with the patient that will become an important promoter of their work.¹

According to the Regional Council of Dentistry of Santa Catarina (CRO/SC), at the moment, there are 12,396 registered dentists, working in the public service, private or both, generating a highly competitive inhabitant/professional rate in the state when compared to other states or even countries, for example. Herein, it is considered essential that the professional has, besides the specific knowledge of the dental area, notions of marketing based on the ethical and legal principles of the profession.^{2,3}

The word marketing is related to a business philosophy, which aims to establish as a principle the fulfilment of customers' needs and desires.⁴ The most used advertising media as marketing strategy are magazines, radio, television, newspapers, telephone, pamphlets, billboards, gifts, correspondence and the Internet.³

Currently, one of the most used approaches is the re-

lationship marketing, since it reinforces the actions of achievement and the maintenance of clients through individualized and personalized services to meet the needs and desires of the individual. With the most evident competitiveness and the growing number of professionals, the understanding of consumer behaviour has become a crucial factor of success today.⁴ Relationship marketing in dentistry is a tool that can be used by all the professionals who find themselves in the private market, increasing the number of people approached through digital strategies and facilitating the creation of connection with the patient.

Thus, it is necessary to be aware of the laws that govern the regular exercise of the profession, such as the new code of dental ethics and the ordinances and more current norms of the Federal Council of Dentistry and Regional Councils of Dentistry, so that the use of Marketing will not be an artifice to gain advantages by means of unfair and illusory competition, generating ethical infractions when increasing the number of patients.

This work aimed to analyse the digital strategies used by the Dental Surgeons of Santa Catarina in relation to the relationship marketing, through digital tools created specifically for this research. In addition to the production of knowledge about the theme, it is expected to contribute to the strengthening of the dental class by legally and ethically identifying current alternatives for professional success.

Material and Methods

It is a quantitative, descriptive, documentary, field and cross-sectional research. The research was performed with Dental Surgeons of the State of Santa Catarina, Brazil, sending a standard e-mail containing information about the content of the research, as well as a link with the questionnaire with open and closed questions and the Informed Consent Term (ICT).

Data collection took place after approval by the Ethics and Research Committee on Human Beings of the University of Extremo Sul Catarinense, under approval number 2.923.822, following the provisions set forth in Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council, which treats about research on human beings, ensuring the confidentiality of the research subjects' identity and the use of data only for this research for scientific purposes.

From an initial sample of 260 professionals, contacted through standard e-mail containing the link to the respective form, as well as explanations about the research and the ICT, a real sample of 31 participants was obtained. Established as inclusion criteria: the volunteer must be dentist registered in the CRO/SC, acting in the State of Santa Catarina, accept to participate in the research, electronically sign the ICT, and answer the questionnaire by October 28th, 2018. The exclusion criteria considered were: incomplete questionnaire and non-compliance with any of the inclusion criteria.

On the form, after an initial theoretical approach, some themes pertinent to the research were debated and selected, such as professional profile, relationship marketing concepts, knowledge and use of digital strategies. From this, an accessible digital instrument with wide scope and easy to be analysed was constructed via Google Forms.

For statistical analysis, we used the simple frequency of responses that were calculated by the Google platform itself through the Excel Program provided by the same platform.

Results

After the data collection period, the study was based on an initial sample of 260 Dental Surgeons from Santa Catarina, but the real sample (*n*) of dentists who submitted their answers by October 28th, 2018 was 31 participants.

Participants Profile

In terms of sociodemographic aspects, it was possible to delineate an interesting profile of dental professionals who participated in this research: young, white and sin-

gle women, with some type of post-graduation, varying from 1 to 4 years of training, generally being owners of the place where they work, with more than one employment relationship

Regarding gender, 80.6% (25) were female and 19.4% (6) male, 48.4% (15) ranging from 21 to 30 years old, followed by 29% (9) aged over 40 years old, 58.1% (18) of whom were single and 100% white.

Considering the level of qualification of the participants, 25.8% (8) reported being specialists and the same percentage of professionals holding a master's degree. A significant percentage reported PhD level (16.1% - 5), whereas 19.4% (6) have no qualification beyond graduation and 12.9% (4) have only professional development courses.

About the property of the dental establishment where they worked, 45.2% of the participants (14) reported being the sole owner, 19.4% (6) had a company and 35.5% (11) reported being hired from the office. Out of 31, 21 (67.7%) reported also having an employment relationship with another institution. Regarding the training time, 32.3% of participants (10) were graduated for 1 to 4 years, 22.6% (7) had 20 years or more of experience and 16.1% (5) have been graduated for 10 to 19 years.

Relationship Marketing and Digital Strategies

The question about the definition of Relationship Marketing showed that 61.3% (19) of the participants defined it as: a process by which the professional builds long-term alliances with their potential patients and colleagues. Still, 25.8% (8) consider it a type of management that establishes as a principle to meet the needs, desires and values of the client, adapting to provide the satisfaction of the consumer in a more efficiently way than their competitors.

Regarding knowledge about digital marketing strategies, 67.7% (21) reported the use of Facebook and WhatsApp, 64.5% (20) included Instagram, and 54.8% (17) reported the use of websites as ways of digital marketing strategies. In spite of this, some participants reported other more traditional strategies that are not considered digital, such as radio, billboards or magazines, the content of which is available on off-line channels, according to Figure 1 (Digital marketing strategies known by the participant dentists).

When questioned about the digital marketing strategies used by participants in their praxis, the use of Facebook and Instagram, 51.6% (16), were the most used tool by the participants of the research (Figure 2).

Total of answers: 31

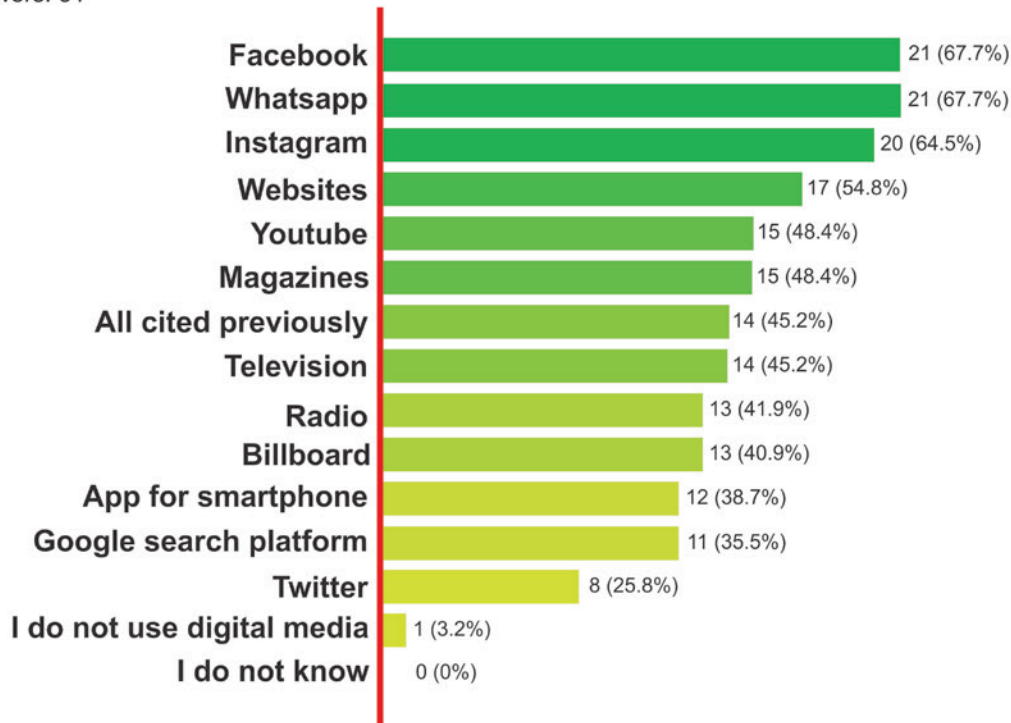


Figure 1. Digital Marketing strategies known by dental surgeons who answered the survey

Legend:

■ Number (%) of participants who selected this answer

Total of answers: 31

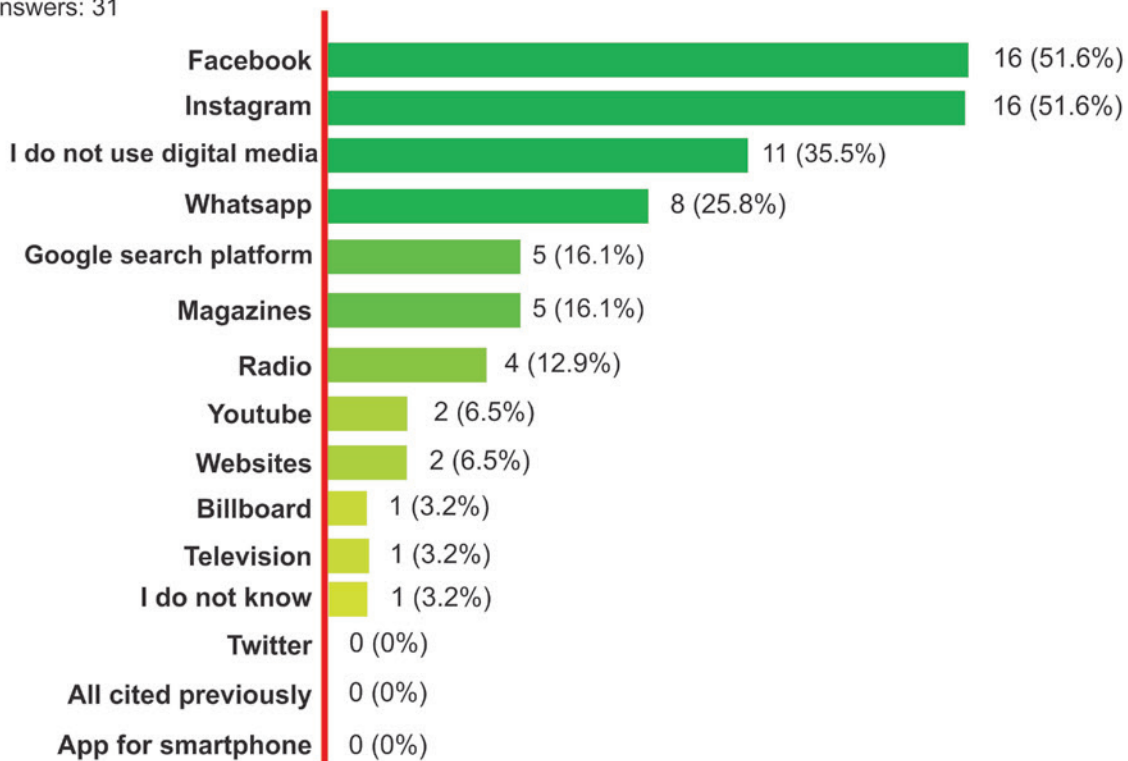


Figure 2. Digital Marketing strategies used by dental surgeons who answered the survey

Legend:

■ Number (%) of participants who selected this answer

The question about the time spent using digital marketing strategies in clinical practice revealed that 29% of the participants (9) do not use strategies, 22.6% (7) did not have a defined frequency of use and 12.9% (4) reported the use for about 30 minutes daily, and the same percentage reported to range from 30 minutes to an hour of daily use.

With regard to the importance given to digital marketing today, 77.4% (24) of the participants considered it very important and 3.2% (1) reported little importance. When questioned about the importance attributed to the use of digital marketing in customer acquisition, 58.1% (18) of the participants emphasized it as being very essential, while 19.4% (6) attributed it to be less essential.

Laws in Dentistry

Considering the legal support of the professional practice in dentistry, the participants were asked about their knowledge about the new Code of Dental Ethics (CDE), which provides articles related to the use of digital marketing. From the answers obtained, 54.8% (17) reported good knowledge and 45.2% (14) reported partial knowledge. Regarding infractions and penalties contained in the new CDE, 51.6% (16) reported partial knowledge, 45.2% (14) reported good knowledge and 3.2% (1) of participants reported that such content was unknown.

Moreover, the ethical infractions contained in the CDE about digital marketing seem to be well known, since only 6.5% (2) judged that advertising of any kind can be performed in any social media, while 96.8% (30) have reported that misleading or abusive advertising, including pre and post-treatment expressions or images, pricing, free services or payment modality are ethical infractions.

Discussion

In the last decades, dentistry was configured as an eminently masculine profession. However, contemporary society is undergoing a process of female inclusion in historically male-dominated professions. In a study conducted by Moraes, Kligerman and Cohen,⁵ it was found that 76.9% (10 - n.13) of the dental surgeons operating in three municipalities of the State of Rio de Janeiro were female, 46.15% (6) in the age group of 41 to 50 years, which represents professionals with more experience. These data diverge from the present study because, spite the fact that 80.6% of the participants in the research are female, they represent a younger age group, around 21 and 30 years old (48.4% - 15).

Miranzi *et al.*,⁶ showed that 55.55% of the participant dentists are married, different from the data found in this study, where 58.1% of the participants report being single. Still, in the same research, 57.47% of dentists working in Family Health Strategy were hired for a specific time, with 71.4% having only one employment relationship and 26.9%

having more than one employment relationship.

In the state of Espírito Santo, in 2017, a survey was carried out,⁷ where the level of knowledge of the dental surgeons was reflected, and in this research 58% (11) had a postgraduate degree, compared to 42% (8) that have none. Our data show a lower percentage in the absence of postgraduate studies, 19.4% (6), and are higher in terms of postgraduate studies (specialization, master's and PhD), totalizing 66.17% (21) of the participants.

Although the vast majority did not correctly define the concept of relationship marketing, 25.8% (8) precisely answered as “a type of management that establishes as a principle to meet the needs, desires and values of the client”, and this should adapt to provide consumer satisfaction more efficiently than their competitors.

Kotler⁸ defines marketing concepting that the key to achieving the goals of organizations is to “determine the needs and desires of target markets and satisfy them in the most effective and efficient way.” The role of marketing is nothing more than winning and keeping customers.^{4,8-10}

Technology is increasingly present in our daily life, structuring new cultural and social concepts, which are now accessible to various levels of society. Every day and especially in recent years, we are being bombarded by new business models and disruptive technologies. These systems simply bring a new way of doing what has already been done for a long time. The development of digital technology submerges humans in an online universe. The free access to the communication vehicles determines the proximity between the different communities, the knowledge of new realities and the construction of new relations. The use of the computer and the Internet has significantly influenced human relations, especially with regard to communication.¹²

Gabriel¹³ states that “as digital technologies increasingly permeate human activities, more digital influence comes to be in marketing” and “any component of marketing strategy to satisfy needs or desires can be used by these technologies on digital platforms or not”. Thus, a transition between traditional and digital marketing is perceived.

In times of high connectivity, dynamism in social and commercial relations, permeated by legislation not always so up-to-date, dental professionals can no longer have the same behaviour from decades or years ago. The person has to be creative, differentiated, innovative. Digital marketing is well established and offers, in an accessible way, countless possibilities for professional success.

Digital marketing is progressively used as a tool for adopting new strategies to reach the target audience more widely and efficiently. The digital format focuses on the consumer, in which it is from the digital platforms that the dental surgeon intends to have an approximation with the patient and understand their behaviour. Nowadays, social media have

become the main strategy of professionals to get to know their future clients from what they expose on the internet, providing professionals with information about their process of choosing and buying services.¹⁴

In the research carried out in Santa Catarina, the participants, dentists with some postgraduate degree and, for the most part, young people mentioned the use of digital marketing strategy platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook; (67.7% - 21), Instagram; (64.5% - 20), websites (54.8% - 17). To test participants' knowledge about Digital Marketing strategies, some options have been inserted that traditionally serve their content offline. Thus, there was a mistaken or confused interpretation about digital marketing, when some participants considered the "Billboard" options 41.9% (13), "Magazines" 48.4% (15) and "Radio" 41.9% (13), without explicitly stating if they are digital or not.

The survey showed that 51.6% (16) use Facebook and Instagram as a strategy, while 35.5% (11) do not use any digital marketing strategy. Of those who used it, 22.6% (7) did not have a defined frequency and 25.8% (15) remained at most one hour a day, thus reflecting the little practical importance attributed to this field of knowledge, even which have theoretically attached great importance to digital marketing (77.4% - 24), in particular for customer acquisition (58.1% - 18).

Reputation in the job market is also a very important factor for relationship marketing to occur, since past experiences influence the patient directly in their choice, being the "word of mouth" very used in dentistry. In the digital environment, this practice has gained a new appearance, since the criticisms and comments related to the service received also have a great influence on the choice of consumers and should be considered by those who use this type of strategy.¹²

All dental surgeons need to be aware of the rules of disclosure of their work, knowing what is allowed and what are the infractions according to the new code of dental ethics,

document that establishes the rights and duties of dental surgeons. Non-knowledge or non-compliance with points in the document may result from a warning to a disqualification from the federal council.¹³ According to a study published in 2018, through a lexical analysis of this document, it has been demonstrated that one of the three major branches of the new code of dental ethics is advertising, one of the main tools of marketing. The professional must have the knowledge about the difference between publicity and advertising, which the purpose of the first concept is to attract the consumer for loyalty or sale of products or services, while the goal of the second one is seeking or changing the attitude of the consumer.

The dental surgeons from Santa Catarina, who participated in this research, mentioned knowing that the new code of dental ethics was satisfactory, even though only 3.2% (1) mentioned not knowing the infractions and penalties contained therein. The most well-known infringements mentioned in this study were misleading or abusive publicity and advertising, including the use of "before and after" images, prices, free services or payment methods and advertisements in any media.

Conclusion

In spite of their good knowledge of dental legislation and marketing, in general, the research participants did not reach the same level of knowledge regarding the definition of relationship marketing and digital strategies. Although the most commonly reported digital strategies were social networks, with the aim of improving and communicating, they were little used for relationship marketing actions. The production and publication of content pertinent to their professional activity presents great potential, either in the negotiation stages, in the development of solid relationships with clients or in the better understanding of its characteristics through the interaction in social media.

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Mini Curriculum and Author's Contribution

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