

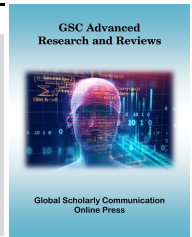


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(REVIEW ARTICLE)



# Branding in dentistry: A historical and modern approach to a new trend

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## Abstract

Branding in dentistry is not a new project. It aims to establish a significant and differentiated presence in the health market that attracts and retains loyal patients. This is accomplished by giving a meaning to the private practice and creating and shaping a unique name and impression in the patients' minds. In this article, a modern approach to the term of branding and its importance in dentistry is applied based on current media, social trends and today's marketing communications environment. Glances are given into the concept of patient-based brand equity and the various ways that current pioneer marketing entities can build it. Negative and positive ways of effective branding techniques for dentists are also discussed. Additionally, the reasons which make the online presence of a dental brand imperative are numbered and suggestions for online branding are reported. Innovative branding ideas are further included relied on pioneer marketing techniques. Finally, this article contains an assessment guide for a dental brand and series of advantages that it brings to the modern dental practice.

**Keywords:** Dental branding; Dental marketing; Online presence; Media branding; Interactive marketing

## 1. Introduction

Branding in dentistry is not a new principle. Dentistry borrowed the term from the management field. In the world of business, branding is the process of giving a meaning to a specific company by creating and shaping a unique name and impression in the mind of the consumers/patients [1]. This process must be authentic and fit with the overall practice development strategy, a principle-centered evolution catalyzed by internal and external marketing activities [1,2]. It aims to establish a significant and differentiated presence in the market that attracts and retains loyal customers/consumers/patients in order to stay connected with them by informing, engaging, and maybe even energizing them in the process [3]. It is a strategy designed by companies, so they strategically influence how others think of their practice by carefully cultivating their personal reputation [1] and clarifying what this brand is and is not. Creating loyal customers is at the heart of every business, or it should at least be, because as an American proverb says, "to keep a customer demands as much skills as to win one".

In this way, companies give people a good reason not only to quickly identify and choose them over the competition, but also recognize them as the sole providers of a solution to their problem or need [4]. In its essence, branding is a problem-solver [4], the key to open the satisfaction of someone's needs. It is important that this strategy is accomplished in an organic and unobtrusive fashion, because it causes the target market to think that they have developed their perception of the brand all by themselves [1]. This is very important in a world of much coping and little imagination, authenticity and creativity. Thus, a product or service can be easily copied by other 'players' in a market, but a brand will always be unique. So, brand differentiation is now becoming an important tactic for combating competition in the hostile marketplace [5,6]. According to the American Marketing Association [7], "a brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."

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Despite its early roots, long history, and power, the concept of branding did not emerge as a central part of thinking in marketing until well into the twentieth century. Nowadays, branding has become a special marketing priority for most companies [8,9]. In the vulnerable market of health services, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent economic recession, branding in the dental field seems a necessity. This means that it is not enough for dental professionals to rely on just the quality and reputation of their practice. They must also create an image and brand to generate and sustain their patient base. Yet, there is little consensus on how brands and branding can or should be effectively developed in the modern interactive marketplace. This is so especially in the dental field, where dentists believe that opening a private practice is all they must do, and customers/patients will immerse in the waiting area. So, the purpose of this paper is to review the role of branding in dentistry and suggest possible ways of well-designed branding roots for new dental professionals.

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## 2. The importance of branding in the market of goods and services

Consumer response is not all cognitive and rational; much may be emotional and invoke different kinds of feelings [3], such as excitement, proudness or confidence. Marketers are increasingly recognizing the power of emotional appeals [3] and vulnerability expressed in a market. As Neil Blumenthal, Co-founder and Co-CEO of War by Parker Community, said “it’s through vulnerability that human beings create connections. The more vulnerable we can be with one another, the more that we’ll trust one another and the more we’ll be able to collaborate effectively”. Now, as patients become consumers, the traditional method of referral, word of mouth, becomes challenged by familiarity [10]. Amazon's owner J. Bezos has been talking about word-of-mouth marketing for a long time, and he couldn't be just more right. People trust recommendations from friends more than any other form of advertising, and they tell people about it when they have great customer experiences with a company. But, they tell 3X more people when they have a bad experience, so it is important for a professional to keep his brand's reputation intact. So “a brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. And you earn reputation by trying to do hard things well”. So, for every patient that a dentist makes happy, especially if it is a hard problem to solve, he should think of the potential for referral marketing he has just created that would lead to more happy patients. Simply put, the more patients see, hear and feel about a name; hopefully the more they will associate and accept its messages in the long term. It is therefore not just the physical features that create a brand but also the distinct feelings which cause the different buying behaviors [11].

In other words, a brand is a sign, a symbol and a value. As Einstein said, a good professional should “strive not to be a success but rather to be of value”. People recognize values in the end of a cooperation process, even if mistaken in the beginning. So, at the root of all branding activity should be the human desire to be someone of consequence and value, to create a personal and social identity and to have a good reputation. Once created based on values, a personal brand is powerful and becomes a “self-screening tool” [1].

As for dental professionals, they sometimes confuse their business with their brand, but their brand is about managing how patients feel when they are in direct or indirect contact with the dental practice [1,2,6]. Personal branding is essentially public relations; it's how a dentist wants people to perceive him and feel about him even in his absence. This means positioning himself as a competent, friendly professional serving the needs of his patients, because his brand is the impression his business leaves upon patients, from scheduling an appointment, relieving dental pain, keeping an aseptic environment, up to interacting on social media. As a result, the health of his brand is imperative to cultivate new patients, build loyalty amongst existing patients and enforce self-evolvement and satisfaction from one's practice.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the brand is even more an interdisciplinary creation. It achieves its status through its integration of innovative technology, high quality design, and widespread appeal, yet elegance and esthetic performance. A brand is an opus, a complex design, a mosaic, a symphony, an evolving cultural construction that benefits from a knowledgeable and perceptive director and conductor, and that fires the imagination through the five senses [12]. To summarize, a service is what someone offers, a brand is the perceived image of the service he provides, and branding is the strategy to create this unique image.

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## 3. Historical review of branding through ages

Sign and symbol were always the essential ingredients of the branding phenomenon through time [13]. But the purposes and meanings of branding were known in the past due to actions like marking and burning. As a form of marking, branding is perceived either positively or negatively. Although, marking the skin has a long history of serving various cosmetic, medicinal, social, psychological, political, and cultural purposes, has also related to inferiority and stigma. The literal idea of burning on the other hand, as a form of branding is also a powerful one. Fire is warm and comforting, it cooks food and gives life, it lights the way and characterizes people who care strongly about their ideas and feelings

[13]. Similarly, branding generates feelings of partisanship and opposition, of power and excitement, because it announces identity. In everyday life, many expressions use fire and brand to communicate character and force, such as when we are inspired, we are “fired up” or when an object is new, it is popularly said to be “brand new”.

Branding is as old as civilization [14]. Although, it is possible to trace back the use of brands all the way to these ancient ages, it was during the 16th century, however, that brands like those we see today have started to take shape [15]. These brands should be referred to as “proto-brands”, because they were information attached to a product or product packaging. This information was about the product’s origin by using a known mark, signature or through the known physical properties of a given raw material in order to allow basic functions of marketing to take place (i.e., sorting, transportation and storage). The most important was that knowing the origin helped to remove uncertainty for consumers, thereby reducing risk in purchase decisions [14].

“Brands” for modern civilization involve both the informational characteristics of the ancient “proto-brands”, and the more complex image characteristics of modern brands including status/power, inherent value and finally, the development of brand personality [6,13,14]. Branding was transformed from a simple entity with limited application and whose creation, interpretation, and control are mostly enacted by one actor (i.e. its creator), to a complex entity that is multi-dimensional and multi-functional, and that receives influences from a variety of actors (e.g. the brand manager, the consumer/patient, the media, the marketing researcher, technology) [13]. The evolution of branding is largely a phenomenon that could have only occurred starting at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, mainly due to the growth of nationwide magazines and media (TV, radio, print advertising, e-marketing, etc.) [6,13-16].

Nowadays, the ubiquity of the concept is evident in the creation of thousands brand manager jobs and in the presence of many academic courses about brand management. Business and academic communities have turned brands into an invaluable tool that, in some respects, outshines the concept of marketing itself. Brand is the new marketing principle. In this sense, with awareness and necessity come specialization and new services. Thousands of brand consultants now offer guidance to achieve the great goal of a strong image. In sum, in a short period (i.e. the last 55 years) the functions and thoughts related to branding evolved from ownership and reputation to brand image, symbolic values and fantasy [13-16] (Table 1).

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#### **4. History of branding in Dentistry**

Dentistry is known as one of the oldest medical professions [11,17]. Despite its ancient origins many people could not afford to see a dental professional and visited barbers for tooth extractions in addition to hair care for almost ages. The beginning of dentistry as a well-known and full profession dates to the Middle Ages (500AC-1575AC). It is also a surprise that during the 16th century, brands like those we see today, have started to come alive and it was during the same time that the dental profession started to take shape. However, the 18th century is a milestone in the development of dentistry as a profession while the 19th century is characterized by advances in dental science and education. Despite the advances made by then, it was not only new inventions and materials in dentistry, but also the large-scale growth of the development of brand personality that are truly a phenomenon of the 20th century (Table 2) [11]. As far as it seems, this insight highlights 21<sup>st</sup> century as the golden age of modern dentistry [17]. So, although branding may appear in the actions of dentists all over the centuries, only nowadays it takes the form of an organized business endeavor.

**Table 1** Historical review of branding through ages.

Time	Reference	Name	Important moment	Effect in branding
Stone Age	[15]	Hunters	Used weapons of specific “brands”.	First form of differentiation between products.
Iron Age	[14]		Controversy of the hierarchical model.	Growth of an alternative model of business organization.
Up to 20 <sup>th</sup> century	[4,13]		Branding was defined as a name, slogan, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these elements that distinguish one company, product, or service from another.	Products were packaged, labelled and promoted. The identity of the source and the names of the producers became regarded sources of added value.
20 <sup>th</sup> century			The large-scale growth of the development of brand personality.	Evolution of branding
1930s	[13]		Psychological theories, insights, and methods began to enrich marketing thinking.	Competing brands sought to understand the increasing segmentation of the mass market.
1942	[14]	H.D. Wolfe	He published the first Journal of Marketing article on the topic of “brand”.	He enumerated techniques of appraising brand preference and brand consciousness.
1955	[13]	Gardner and Levy	“A public image, a character or personality, may be more important for the overall status of the brand” than many other facts.	The study of branding grew gradually and expanded in terms of both application and thinking.
1960s	[15]	William Lazer	The concept of lifestyle was introduced, and the field of branding was associated with mass production and communication. Through commercials, products were differentiated only by quality and functionality.	It was proven through research that consumers considered brands as an important factor in their purchase decision, even in the case of everyday products.
1970s	[15]		Lifestyle marketing attracted much attention.	Branding affected the entire marketing discipline.
1980s	[15]		Brand equity was introduced to measure the value of a brand and specifically the long-term effect of branding efforts.	This concept answers the question of how well a company performs in the market.
1990s	[13,14,15]	Aaker, Keller	Aaker focused on brand equity and brand strategy management and defined brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”, that according to Keller are sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.	Companies had started to communicate what immaterial value their products could offer in comparison to their competitors’. The brands were developed to become story-telling brands with the aim to create a meaning for their consumers.

**Table 2** Brief overview of the history of branding in dentistry [11,17]

Time	Reference	Name	Important moment	Effect in branding
500-300 BC	Hippocrates and Aristotle	Greece	They write about dentistry, including the eruption pattern of teeth, treating decayed teeth and gum disease, etc.	Oral health's importance to general health gave a boost to the interest of ancient therapists.
201 AC		Ancient Etruscans	They created dental prosthetics including gold crowns.	Ancient prosthodontists advertised the addition of lost teeth in the mouth.
1210		France	Barbers performed routine hygienic services including shaving, bleeding and tooth extraction.	
1530	Artzney Buchlein	Germany	The first book devoted entirely to dentistry was published.	
1723	Pierre Fauchard	France	His book was the first to describe a comprehensive system for the practice of dentistry including basic oral anatomy and function, operative and restorative techniques and denture construction.	Until then, dentistry was only about practicing and discovering new materials, as dentists weren't interested in educational matters or marketing strategies.
1768-1770	Paul Revere	Boston	He places advertisements in a newspaper offering his services as a dentist.	The first sign as a form of branding in dentistry, but it was not an organized promotion effort like the ones which have been observed nowadays.
1789	Nicolas Dubois de Chemant	France	First patent for porcelain teeth.	The first leaflet and posters on the "new teeth" immersed in the market.
1825	Samuel Stockton	United States	Commercial manufacture of porcelain teeth.	In the marketing field during the 19th century products came increasingly to be packaged, labelled, and promoted, thus adding the identity of the source to the utility of the product. The names of their producers became regarded as sources of added value. As for dentistry, it was then that dental products barely started to be accessible to the market.
1833	Crawcour brothers		The amalgam filling was later introduced commercially.	
1880s			Tube toothpaste was developed in the 1880s, allowing the product to be mass-produced and sold nationwide.	
1839			The very first dental journal, the American Journal of Dental Science was published.	Further proof of the spread of education and science related to dentistry.
1840	Chapin Harris and Horace Hayden	Baltimore	First dental school in the world and the American Society of Dental Surgeons were founded.	
1859	Twenty-six dentists	Niagara Falls, New York	Formation of the American Dental Association.	
1883	Members of the dental boards of several states		The National Association of Dental Examiners is founded in order to establish uniform standards in the qualifications for dental practitioners.	This is an early attempt by dentists to "brand" themselves even though "branding" as a marketing term didn't exist yet.

1885	C. Edmond Kells	New Orleans	The first female dental assistant is employed.	Soon “Lady in Attendance” signs are routinely seen in the windows of 19th century dental offices, slowly securing the presence of female gender in business areas.
1890	Willoughby Miller	Germany	His book Micro-Organisms of the Human Mouth generates an unprecedented interest in oral hygiene and starts a world-wide movement.	This is a first time that the public is informed on oral hygiene issues and promotion of regular tooth brushing and flossing is been observed.
1899	Edward Hartley Angle	St. Louis	Classifies the various forms of malocclusion and makes orthodontics into a dental specialty.	Dentists had just started to acquire scientific training and discover dental specialties, so it was expected to ignore marketing strategies for the moment.
1905	Alfred Einhorn	Germany	Formulates the local anaesthetic procaine, later marketed under the trade name Novocain.	
1928	Charles Pincus	California	Porcelain veneers were invented to be used for a film shoot for temporarily changing the appearance of actors' teeth.	Branding of porcelain veneers
1938			The nylon toothbrush, the first made with synthetic bristles, appears on the market.	Branding of the toothbrush
1945		Newburgh, New York Grand Rapids, Michigan.	The water fluoridation era begins when the cities add sodium fluoride to their public water systems.	Branding of fluoridation
1950			The first fluoride toothpastes are marketed.	Branding of fluoridated toothpastes
1960		United States	The first commercial electric toothbrush is introduced. A cordless, rechargeable model follows in 1961. Sit down, four-handed dentistry becomes popular.	Branding of the electric toothbrush  This technique improves productivity and shortens treatment time.
Late 1960s	Dr William Klusmeier	Arkansas	He introduced the customized tray bleaching.  Composite resins were introduced as an alternative to silicates and unfulfilled resins.	Branding of customized tray bleaching  Branding of composite resins
1978		Europe	Various microfilled resins systems were introduced into the market.	
1989	Haywood and Heymann		They published an article that supported this method and became accepted by people.  The first commercial home tooth bleaching product is marketed.	Branding of at home bleaching

## 5. History of dental branding in Greece

Dental branding in Greece is a 21<sup>st</sup> century's novelty that is even flourishing in the days to come. This is evidenced by the long history of dentistry in Greece (Table 3) [18], that intended to establish the dental profession as an autonomous and indispensable business activity. Branding as a business practice may have flourished in the late 19th century, but it was introduced in dentistry in the late 20th century. Concerning Greece, branding in dentistry is something extremely new and seems like a solution to a great amount of business problems that new dental professionals deal with.

**Table 3** History of dental branding in Greece.

Time	Important Moments in Greek Dental Branding
Mid-15th century-1821	There were medieval dental practitioners, no branding except of advertisement in local events.
1834	The decree of 1834 stipulated that in order to obtain the right to practice the profession, a dentist had to be approved of the Medical Conference after rigorous examinations. This was the first serious attempt which laid the foundations of the Greek dental science and dental profession. It was the first branding attempt of the profession in Greece.
1893	Foundation of the first dental school by D. Karakatsanis. The first branding for a dental school in Greece.
1894	Publication of the first Greek scientific dental journal by D. Karakatsanis.
1925	Organization of the first PanHellenic Dental Congress.
1926	The American Dental Association of Greece and the Greek Dental Association were founded in Athens.
1930	Erection of the Pan-Hellenic Dental Association. Different dental journals contributed to the advancement of Greek dental practice.
1937	The first dental hygiene exhibition in Zappeion was a collective effort which made the public aware of oral health issues.
1970	The two dental departments of the Universities of Athens and Thessaloniki were transformed into independent Dental Schools.
1976	The 64th World Dental Congress was held in Athens. A great scientific-professional leap that raised the prestige of Greek Dentistry internally and highlighted its potential abroad.

## 6. Modern approach to dental branding

Branding is not very common so far in the private practice health care [19]. It is though suggested that personal dental branding should be an expression of what kind of a professional a dentist is; his values, his integrity and his mission. In order to disrupt someone's thinking and stand out, he has to say something noticeable, memorable, and shareable, because those products and services that have a strong brand behind hold an enormous competitive advantage in the market [2,6,16]. A service, such as dental care, can be more challenging than promoting a product, because a service is not about selling something that is tangible. It is in fact something invisible and the patient can't see, touch or feel a service, until it is unique and "has its own name". In other words, only a branded practice succeeds in awaking of human senses as factor in purchasing behavior [12]. A practice that successfully brands itself will take a head-and-shoulders and stand-out lead above the competition [19].

In the years to come, branding in dentistry will enforce its position as a newcomer with the greatest potentials. Dentists will be surprised enough to realize that building a brand is not just about having beautiful signage or a huge marketing campaign with plenty of advertisements according to local legislation status. That is just the tip of the iceberg. Branding will be much more: a spiritual connection between therapist and patient. The dentist will not even own his own brand; it will be in the mind of his patients.

## 7. Negative and positive ways of dental branding

It is a truth that bad branding can mean bad business. Negativity, when used appropriately of course, can sometimes be just as effective, if not more effective, than positivity [6,15]. But the fact is that in oral health sectors like dentistry, negativity can give people a disgusted view of the office which can cost a dentist the reputation he struggled to establish (Table 4). On the other hand, a truly remarkable dental practice claims to communicate its points of differentiation clearly and consistently [19]. Marketers are fond of this branding that they found vital to winning the marketing game [19]. In developing a strategic marketing plan, a brand should positively serve as a guide to understand the purpose of key business objectives and enables the dentist to align the plan with those objectives [4]. He needs a strong, effective, and cohesive brand strategy and design that convey his service’s quality, credibility, value, and experience (Table 5).

**Table 4** Negative ways of dental branding and their effects on dentist-patient relationship.

Negative dental branding	Effects on dentist-patient relationship
Absence of communication of its points of differentiation clearly and consistently [1,19].	Patient’s confusion, mistrust, and in many cases, conflict
Setting expectations outside the scope of its primary purpose or capabilities [1,19].	Patient’s discomfort, mistrust and disappointment
Delivering one thing while the patient’s expectations are different [10].	Patient’s disappointment, rejection
Usage of a logo which is confusing, poorly designed, too complex and not immediately recognizable [10].	High risk of bad customer experience, bad reviews, rejection
Failure to build a personal connection through meaningful and relevant content [15].	Patient’s remorse and loss of trust, rejection
Building brand’s reputation on one person and usage of only his name to identify dental practice [6,16].	Patient’s discomfort due to loss of information about the specialty of the practice, the location and the services provided
Ignorance of the social media and publishing content with poor grammar or typos [6,12].	Patient’s stress that the dentist is careless and doesn’t pay attention to detail
Failure to integrate branding throughout the practice and misalignment of practice’s online presence with other marketing materials [6].	Patient’s perception of poor quality that damages reputation, irresponsibility, reduced professionalism
Failure to train dental staff [2].	Patient’s mistrust and in many cases, conflict

**Table 5** Positive ways of dental branding and their effects on dentist-patient relationship.

Positive Dental branding	Effects on dentist-patient relationship
Development of a clear, sharp positioning statement that best characterizes the essence of dental practice in the mind of the patient [8, 20].	Trust through responsible and direct communication
View one’s practice through the eyes and senses of his patients [2].	Empathy, conversational and emotional intelligence in communication, feeling united
Choosing only the important aspects of one’s brand image	Time saving and effective communication
Identification of a value-added edge over the competition [1,4].	Clear messaging, the most wanted patients, cases, referrals and consistent profit growth
Creation of a universal brand that appeals to many patients, target to universal acceptance	Mouth to mouth marketing, patient’s franchising



Definition of the target market which shows the most interest in the service [5].	Time saving, avoidance of conflicts, confirmation of credibility in the marketplace
Telling the truth about the practice and focusing on the goals and benefits of the dental practice [4].	Loyalty and understanding, clear communication and trust, feeling of being part of something significant
Creation of a clear visual identity, with a combination of logo, typeface, colours and words that represents the company's services and values [19].	Flexibility through multiple platforms, general acceptance of the classic and aesthetic
Maintain consistency with brand's voice across all platforms [2,6,12].	Acceptance through the power of habit and repetition in other social channels
Feeding the good emotion of the target prospect patients.	Emotional attachment, trust, desire to pass along things about brands, through either word of mouth or online sharing
Free sharing of knowledge through emotional connection and free services for the underprivileged.	Cooperation through values, integrity and humanism endear the practice to likeminded individuals
Readiness to provide prospective patients a variety of answers in their question "Why to choose you?" and create a storytelling brand.	Enhancement of the personal brand that gives the dental practice a human quality
Usage of opportunities to humanize the dental practice and let patients know about dentist's academic background, training and experience, special skills and specializations, certifications, awards, achievements, and community involvement [19].	Improvement of the sense of familiarity and safety
Understanding the needs and wants of the patients [4].	Sympathy, feeling accepted, fulfilment, connection on an emotional level
Effective communication of the brand message at every marketing opportunity [19]. (Direct mail newsletters, postcards, brochures).	Feeling of care, sympathy, acceptance
Free articles for local publications.	Acceptance recognizability, enhancement of professional reputation
Keeping last names out of the practice name. This will position the brand better for growth, especially when hiring associates.	Patients who make an appointment to see one of the dentists at the practice won't feel short-changed if they aren't seeing the dentist whose name is on the door.
Participation in education programs globally.	Quality of care in the field of advanced comprehensive dentistry
Promotion of the practice on a waiting room TV or cross promotes it with business partners.	Competitive game, most patients today want to work with a modern, progressive-minded, and inviting dental practice
Cooperation with a marketing coach/consultant to increase productivity.	Improvement of self-satisfaction, better time management, satisfaction of the patient
Connection with local and regional dental associations.	Being an active member of the society and having opportunities for partnerships and group actions.
Asking patients for reviews.	Patient feedback builds stronger relationships and enhances trust. Moves the practice to excellence.

## 8. Modern digital ways of dental branding

There are a few ways of digital branding well accepted in the dental field as discussed below.

### 8.1. Website

As noted already, visual identity should be clear, uncluttered and unique to brand's identity [6,9], because it is competing with 3,000 commercial messages that prospective patients are exposed per day [19]. Certainly, a dentist, nowadays, should focus on a strong brand in place online [13], because that's where his patients expect most of his interactions to take place. "Everyone has the internet in their pocket all the time, and this changes everything for small businesses" (Cory Capoccia, Forbes). Ninety-seven percent of consumers go online to find local services and seventy-three percent use online search engines to research dental treatments [23]. Digital strategies have been proven to help companies improve their performance and retain new customers [6,12]. As a result, it is imperative that potential patients can easily find dental practice online [12]. A distinct website is the center of all digital marketing efforts, stands out from competitors' and connects practice with specific new patient demographic target [6,12]. If a dentist doesn't have the design skills to do it himself, then it's worth hiring someone to create a website which has all the characteristics, described in Table 6, in order to achieve high accessibility and visiting records.

**Table 6** The characteristics of a well-designed dental website and their importance.

Characteristics	Importance of Characteristics
Speed	Speed affects bottom line, which is the final total profit of the website.
Security	By making the website HTTPS instead of HTTP, a dentist protects himself and his patients. HTTPS is a way to encrypt information that you send between a browser and a web server. This is imperative because eighty-two percent of people wouldn't browse an unsecured website [6,12].
Mobile friendliness	A responsive website changes shape when browsing on mobile so that no information is lost and offers a better browsing experience. Google ranks mobile-friendly sites much more favourably than those without responsive design. According to Google, seventy-seven percent of smartphone owners have used their smartphones to find local health services in the past six months, and seventy-nine percent of them say they're more likely to revisit and/or share a mobile site if it is easy to use [4,10,12].
Coded for SEO	Patients turn immediately to an online search engine when they're looking to solve their healthcare queries. The best healthcare websites are coded in a way that makes it easy for the search engines' software to find, crawl, and index them.

Web design is a marketing tactic, which influences the amount of time and attention a user will spend on the page [3,6,12]. It is just like a building's exterior and patients will judge it based on how it looks and functions [23]. It is frequently the first interaction a patient has with the practice and first impressions matter for patients who want to be treated in an organized and pleasant environment.

In fact, 48 percent of people cited a website's design as the number one factor in deciding the credibility of a business, and once the page loads, users form an opinion in .05 seconds [23]. Therefore, a website needs to attract the interest of patients within three seconds of landing there, because if it takes longer, almost 50 percent will hit the "back" button [23]. This achievement is possible if the website is created based on certain tips, mentioned in Table 7.

**Table 7** Tips, interactions and results of an effective dental website.

<b>Suggested tips</b>	<b>Interactions and results</b>
“First Visit” page	Presents dentist’s positioning statement. In other words: “What people should remember about his practice if they could remember only one thing?” Results in recognition
Online scheduling	Online booking is becoming a necessity. Oral health systems are now offering self-scheduling and patients already have used self-scheduling [20,21]. Results in time management
Customized patient portals	Patients want and should easily access their health data. Results in time management and safety of personal rights
Online facilitation tools	Online bill payment, online prescription renewal and emergency wait room times. Results in time management and secure payments
Messaging capabilities	Quick and easy access to communication with the dental providers. Results in customized care that enhances the relationship with the patients
Doctor or specialist look up Profiles for each dentist	Any local connections between the team and the area that they serve would be helpful. Key local terms can improve website’s visibility, but it is important that whatever is added to biographies are right and relevant.
Healthy supply of videos	Free engagement in oral health prevention strategies. Results in recognition and enlarges reputation.
Options for virtual visits with health practitioners	Consumers need convenience and would be interested in receiving virtual health services. Virtual healthcare visits will increase soon. Results in acceptance and reputation for the dentist and change of attitude towards oral health for the patient.
Images with completed alt-tags.	Alternative text is text associated with an image that serves the same purpose and conveys the same essential information as the image. In situations where the image is not available to the reader, the alternative text ensures that no information or functionality is lost. Also, search engines and other robots cannot interpret images and alt tags solve this problem. Results in sharp and direct communication.
Dental schema	It makes it easier for search engines to interpret content and, therefore, be more likely to be included in the search results for a related query. Results in effective media projection.
Virtual tour with photos and captions	While optimizing a site, a virtual tour shows prospective patients the experience of the dental practice. As the saying goes, “a photo is worth a thousand words.” Photos are some of the most clicked items on the Internet, and people naturally gravitate toward them when browsing online. Results in effective media projection.
Slide share presentations	They could include quality content driven by patients’ wants and needs. Results in recognition.
Backlinks from authoritative and relevant websites	Google looks at links back to the website from other sites as little badges of authority. The more authority it has, the higher it ranks. Results in effective media projection.
Google map & local directions on the contact page	Not only this encourages visitors to choose a dentist’s practice, it also gives him a chance to quickly boost his local SEO score. When a dentist includes written directions in his map listing, he must be sure to include local landmarks like hospitals or schools to capture more local search terms. Results in convenience and time management.
Right healthcare industry keywords	This will get the healthcare unit to the top of search results. Results in recognition.
CRM Software	It is a software solution that enables a company to interact with its existing and potential customers by managing personal data, sales and flow of customer-related processes. The CRM term is in fact an “umbrella” term that embraces the customer-centric philosophy of the business by focusing on the human factor. This philosophy in dental industry is imperative because of the face to face interaction and customer lifetime value.
Message matching	With ‘Message Matching’ the landing page has the exact same headline as the ad, with only one thing to click. It takes a little extra work, but the conversions could jump up in a matter of days, just by creating dedicated landing pages for each campaign. Results in recognition.

## 8.2. Online Reviews

Patients start their search for a dentist with a search engine (like Google). Then they judge the dentist based on his notable presence on his website. But website ranking doesn't just come from what's on it. Things like active participation in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn or other dental blogs and sites through interviews or guest blogging, all enhance his status and position in Google's eyes. Research by Klein & Partners revealed that 11 percent of visitors to a hospital or health system say their website experience created new, negative feelings about that brand [23]. A single bad experience on a website makes users 88% less likely to visit the website again [23]. Eighty eight percent of consumers trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation [23]. These statistics point to one thing: a website is critical to the success of the dental practice. But a website is useless unless it ranks high in the search results and is highly visible [12, 25]. There are two places it needs to rank well, the local pack and the organic search results.

Local pack is a group of 4-5 business listings that show up above the organic search results [23]. The Local Pack listing alone accounts for approximately 44 percent of clicks by users of Google and on mobile; it's the only thing searchers see without scrolling down [23]. The information in the local pack is pulled from a few places, but primarily from Google My Business page (it includes business's categories, main phone number, business' description, hours of operation, address or service area, reviews) [22,23], which is the easiest, least time-consuming way to attract more patients. It is, also, extremely important for Local SEO rankings and getting the website found online [22]. It is a small dental marketing idea that has a great effect.

Below the local pack are the organic search results. The website should of course achieve organic rankings; otherwise there is little chance of attaining visibility in local search and maps. To rank well organically in the search results (whether it's Bing, Google, or Yahoo), a dentist should use Search Engine Optimization (SEO) [22,23]. It is a free method of Search Engine Marketing that uses a variety of techniques, such as keywords and titles, to make sure a website appears in search engine results when someone searches for information related to its content. Every dentist should build local and niche relevant citations for his practice [22] and create accurate local search listings in directories (such as Yelp, Local Dental Associations, etc.), because this will grow his online exposure and increase his website's visibility [23,24].

There is, also, Paid Search Marketing (PPC-Pay per Click). It is an internet advertising model used to drive traffic to websites, in which an advertiser pays a publisher (typically a search engine, website owner, or a network of websites) when the ad is clicked. Paid search programs, such as Google Adwords or Facebook Ads, differ from organic search ones in that a professional is paying to have his website or offer displayed higher in search results. The average cost per click differs for search ads and actions (e.g. filling out a contact form).

## 8.3. Dental Blog

Dental blogs offer advice, share bits of information and really connect the dentist with his patients [24,25]. A blog could include articles with content that answers to everything patients are curious about, from how often they need to brush their teeth to what kind of toothbrush they should use. Searches for "best toothbrush" have grown more than 100 percent in the past two years [23]. A lasting relationship begins with trust and familiarity, and a blog is a great media if innovative ideas are included. A well-established blog should for example: 1) correct a wrong assumption (e.g. people believe that if they are not in pain they don't need to go to the dentist. This is one belief that a dentists could turn into a host of blog posts, 2) take on a trend (e.g. aesthetic dentistry and especially teeth whitening are modern issues that interest patients nowadays), and 3) help to create healthy habits (e.g. healthy living is in, so dentists should take advantage of it. People are always looking for easy ways to be healthy and brushing and flossing are about as easy as it gets. Dentists should create blog posts around creating not just a healthy mouth, but a healthy body).

A dental blog should be used for allowing a professional to consistently post new keywords and optimize his search engine strategy, because Google is always looking out for new, high-quality content on the web to judge for relevancy [24]. By having a blog that publishes relevant posts on a rolling basis, dentists are indicating to Google that they are a valuable resource on dentistry and as a result the number of eyes on their site will increase [24,25]. So, the solution is blogging frequently and keeping the dental blog focused on oral health, local events and relevant dental issues to keep a concise keyword strategy that further boosts search engine rankings.

## 8.4. Dental App

With an app, a dentist will be addressed as a trustworthy, professional and modern practitioner – but that's not the only benefit. A dental app will also provide a simple way for patients to book in for appointments and will send push notifications out to let them know when their appointment is coming up in order to avoid the annoyance of missed

checkups. Possibly patients could also pay their bills, book the time for emergency waiting rooms, ask questions about dental practice and be provided with information for new technologies and further dental issues. A dentist through the app not only can offer added value that will keep people using dental practice by including helpful guides within the content of his app, but also offer loyalty schemes built-in for the most dental-health-conscious patients. [22]

### **8.5. Social Media**

A strong social media campaign can help dentists establish themselves as “leading-edge dentist in town” [19], as there are various vehicles of social media which can be optimized to “brand” dental practice [25] and connect a dentist with his patients on their desktop computers and mobile devices. According to Statistica, 76% of the U.S. population has at least one social networking profile and by 2020 the number of worldwide users of social media is expected to reach 2.95 billion. Social media except for a great way for the dentist to establish an organic connection with his prospective patients can be also used as an opportunity for patients to get to know him and popularize him in their area [22,23]. There are also people who fear the dentist, or who think of it as a very sterile, harsh environment [22,26]. Posts on social media, for example, can show them what the dental team does outside of work or moments of teamwork in the dental office and create in this way a friendlier environment in their minds.

Active social media accounts give dental clinics a face and authentic personality and they are the piece of his reputation a dentist can control in order to gain competitive advantage. Dentists can engage social media users through humor and information on a regular basis, but they must be sure to plan out this process carefully and double check how they comment or interact. People online have a strong memory for mistakes and dentists don't want to do anything to jeopardize their reputation [24,25].

Many dentists don't realize that they should concentrate on practicing effective marketing to brand their practice [2]. The average person today is highly internet savvy and wants to feel empowered with adequate information before deciding [22,26]. Specifically, seventy percent of consumers expect a company to have a social media presence, and the average social media consumer spends more than 2 hours on social media sites per day [23].

As mentioned, social media is great for engaging the dentist with his patients and boosting his online credibility and visibility. A combination of sophisticated content and active interaction with users boosts the ranking score because Google marks the information as important to the dental industry [24]. Also, social media accounts drive more traffic back to the website and allow users to see this content and interact with it, such as they can comment, like, and share it [24]. This visibility isn't easy to achieve on other platforms.

One of the most notable benefits of social media is the functionality to target a unique audience based on parameters like location, income, gender, age, likes, and interests [12, 22,23]. A dentist can additionally use the familiarity with his patients as a compass to guide him when planning his brand strategy, because he is aware of their expectations and needs. Another benefit is that most social media platforms provide rich analytics facilities [24]. This is a gold mine of information that allows the dentist to study user behavior [22,24]. He can check when they use mobile phones, how they share when they're most active, and where they are from [24].

Therefore, it is crucial that the content of social media accounts is informative and well-written for best results and that its posts are renewed regularly (Table 8).

**Table 8** Suggested posts and their impact on the dental media image.

<b>Posts</b>	<b>Impact of the posts</b>
Simple infographics based on dental content	They are graphic visual representations of information, data, or knowledge intended to present information to others quickly, easily and clearly.
Reminders about the dental benefits	Many people with dental insurance don't take full advantage of their benefits. A reminder can be a great provision.
Videos	These can highlight patients and the work the dentist does. They can also include an office tour and tooth brushing tips.
Before and after results	People always want to look like an "after". By seeing someone with a "before" smile that looked like theirs encourage them to ask for dental services and increases dentist's credibility.
Information about staff's personality	Along with responding to people in the comments, practice will seem approachable and trustworthy.
Dentist Q & A	Dental patients are full of questions and a dentist can provide them with the right answers by listening carefully to them and tracking the most common questions. It could be profitable if he also tagged in his post the patient at the time.
Contests and Giveaways	Through Facebook/Instagram competitions, a dentist gets excellent exposure online. He can also encourage promotion from his customers in exchange for a free product or service and the result will be surge in purchases or connections.
Hashtags	A dentist can utilize hashtags to make it easier for people to find him, because they bring in a lot of traffic when used correctly. By optimizing his business page hashtags, he can attract attention from the right audience. A tip is to learn about his followers or kind of patients he wants to attract and see what kind of hashtags they are using! Except from creating hashtags he can use popular hashtags like #dental (~1.4 million posts), #dental work (~54k posts), #teeth (~4 million posts), and #teeth whitening (~600k posts) [22].
Information about encyclopaedic issues	Because of size and location, local dental offices don't typically get thousands of clicks, likes, shares on Facebook. But ideas like these will get fans engaging with Facebook posts, build brand loyalty, and offer the customers a glimpse inside the dental operation [22].
A Local list	Local business listings are online portfolios that contain information about a business, such as name, address, phone number and hours of operation. They are some of the most popular items on social, since they represent a huge amount of all posts shared and they don't need to be only about dentistry. A list is a great way for the dentist to share his personal thoughts, for example about the cities he serves, by using local keywords in the introduction and conclusion of his post.
A "Photo Booth"	Dentists can create a person-sized Instagram frame in which happy dental patients can pose to share the pictures of their handiwork. They can also offer patients to take a picture with their phone so they can share to their social network and share the photo (with their permission) on their practice's Instagram page and Facebook account as well [22].

## 8.6. Dental Videos

Videos are 50 times more likely to rank organically in the search results than text pages, and they receive a 41% higher click-thru rate when compared to plain text results [23, 24]. They are a great way to keep audience engaged and entertained, because according to a recent study, videos make up 62% of all Google searches universally [24]. Also, building out a YouTube page with videos that answer the most common questions about dental issues, will not only make a dentist the go-to authority but also clear up any confusion about his services [23]. Healthcare is a prime industry to use video because of the flexibility of ways in giving information and answering frequent asked questions (Table 9).

**Table 9** Ideas for videos of a healthcare facility.

Video items	Explanation
Website welcome videos	Nobody wants to go to a shady dentist's office, so a video is a great way to welcome them. It speaks to the human side, creates empathy and summarizes the history and mission of the healthcare facility. Also, it helps time-crunched patients get the information they need quickly. [23]
Patient review videos	By having testimonials and reviews from previous patients who appreciate his work, a dentist builds confidence in his abilities and puts patients' mind at ease [23]. Healthcare industries go together with unpleasant emotions like fear, anger, sadness, and uncertainty, so trust is the key, even before a patient walk through dental office's doors.
Procedure and treatment overviews	As for dental surgeries, videos of the procedure overview and the after-effects will have a great impact on patients' belief about the dental practice [12,22,26].
Educational videos	These can refer to commonly asked questions or dental conditions, such as: "Should I use activated charcoal to whiten my teeth?" "How can I effectively clean my teeth?" "How do I know if I have a cavity?" [23]. For example, tooth brushing videos are some of the most viewed content on YouTube. By creating content like "how-to" videos, practices can build trust and a strong channel of communication [22,25].
Physician profile videos	It is a great way to increase confidence and trust. Once the dentist has determined how he wants his patients and community to perceive him, he can make his profile video which says a great deal about both his healthcare philosophy and his unique dental skills.
Office Tour Video	It is a great way to introduce the personality of the dental office and lure potential patients to schedule an appointment. Each video could last less than 30 seconds and highlight individual areas or include a long walkthrough of the dental office. The aim is to make dental office feel like a pleasant and hospitable place for patients to visit.

## 8.7. Online Press Releases

When a dentist uses online press releases, he is getting his information out there in a formal setting [25]. Also, by providing content for other websites he gets his business information a wide distribution. This allows newspapers, blogs, or other media sources to see his information and write posts about his office without him needing to put in the effort to connect and claim a story [24,25].

## 8.8. Email marketing

The dental space is highly competitive and overly crowded, so it is essential for dentists to utilize unique marketing strategies to reach and attract potential patients in their area. One of the best and often underutilize marketing strategies is email marketing automation. [22] Dentists have a lot to gain by promoting their practice through email marketing [22]. Over 90 percent of adults want better email communication from their doctor [23]. It makes sense, considering checking email is the first thing 66 percent of people do after they wake up [28].

Dentists need to put an emphasis on using various tactics including digital advertising in order to build up a quality email list [22]. For example they could send appointment reminders and "It's Time For..." reminders that inform patients, request a friend referral, latest health news and expert commentary, announcements about the latest

technology in dental office, seasonal beverage tip sheets on how to avoid teeth stains, dental health product reviews and emails that give them motivation to keep up with their dental health [28].

But it isn't enough to just send out emails. Dentists should consider various email lists that cater to the specific needs of each individual and present a personalized approach to their campaigns [24]. By taking a hard and clear look at the purchasing habits of their patients, they can use that information to develop their strategy. They must gather this information along with other patient acquired info (name, address, etc.) and with this email list they can retarget them or use look-a-like audiences in advertising [22]. Furthermore, an opt-in email list allows customers to sign up in order to receive email correspondence and alongside allows a dentist to connect with potential customers and current clients [24].

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## 9. Investing on dental branding

In order to design a good brand and develop his marketing plan, a dentist should have a budget. Andrew Carnegie author of "The gospel of wealth" and one of the richest Americans in history, advised professionals to concentrate their energies, their thoughts and their capital. "The wise man puts all his eggs in one basket and watches the basket" [26]. As such a dentist should focus on his branding schedule carefully and revisit his marketing plan at least once every quarter of the year. Marketing is an investment and a serious budget will ensure that his team follows through on the market roadmap to reach important goals. Even though his marketing plan will help him visualize a clear path to success, circumstances can change immediately and make his plan obsolete or outdated. As a result, his ideas must be renewed at every branding opportunity [27]. There are a few thought-provoking questions that can help a dentist examine if his brand is strong enough in order to give him the internal and external value that he needs at those re-evaluation times [4,11].

1) How is the brand perceived against competitors in the dental market? 2) What is the positioning statement of the brand? (Answer the what, how, to whom, where, why and when questions), 3) Who is the audience? Are they digitally savvy? Where will the services have contact with them? How will the contact experience make them feel, act and think about the brand? 4) What values & beliefs should the brand have about the dental office and its mission in the world? If the brand was a person, what would its personality be? How would it look, act and talk? 5) What benefits will the patients associate with the brand? 6) What is the vision of the brand that someone wants to create?

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## 10. Discussion

Business owners often rely solely on their intuition to make business decisions [27]. While this informal knowledge is important in the decision-making process, it may not provide them with all the weapons they need to stand out in a dental industry that is dramatically changing due to the rapid rise of consumerism in healthcare together with the COVID-19 recession crisis in healthcare systems worldwide. At the same time, the meteoric rise in the capabilities of the Internet and social media has indeed been "game changers" [25]. Information of every type can be shared and made readily available to both prospective and current patients [25]. As a result, the most critical step to a successful dental marketing campaign is the creation of a unique dental brand based on a strong online marketing strategy [3,6,10].

With a strong brand in place online, a dentist has a head start with his dental marketing plan. A successful brand, will help especially new dentists boost their businesses, define who they are as dental professionals, be the trusted neighborhood experts for their prospective patients, connect with their employers, build their reputation and set the course for a meaningful leadership career [4,6,9,10]. But dentists should first evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, see if they match with what patients consider about them [2] and then formulate a plan for success, because executing marketing strategy isn't a walk in the park [23]. Having the right dental brand identity is an asset and it should be managed well. It takes impeccable timing, lots of dedication, and hyper-consistency.

Building a brand requires "outside the office" thinking [2]. Many dentists make the mistake of arming themselves with creative dental marketing ideas [23], but then do not take into account not only that those ideas actually need to be executed flawlessly [23], but also the importance of ethics and clinical excellence in the establishment and maintenance of an enduring practice [25]. After all, a branded practice will be worth more than a non-branded practice [19]. Patients will happily pay more for a brand than for a generic alternative, because they assume, either consciously or unconsciously, that they reduce perceived risk [19]. However, this motive involves risks and there is no better long-term recipe for success than a practice that is truly "patient centered" and where the needs of the patient are considered over the needs of one's wallet [25].



Also, patients know that advertisers invest a lot of money in building their brands, so except for the reduced risk, they buy brands for status [19]. An excellent patient experience is based on convenient appointments, friendly staff, efficiency, customer service facilitation and stress reduction [2]. It is a fact that people refer more often and more passionately to a brand they like, trust and has these characteristics.

In a competitive market environment dental practice needs to stand out in a positive and highly distinctive way because it is being compared directly to all others [19]. A viable solution for establishing the distinctiveness of a brand is through brand personality [5]. Attaching personalities to brands contributes to a differentiating brand identity, which can make brands more desirable to the patient [5].

Thus, building a brand is an effective strategy for positioning dental practice for continued success in the face of present and future challenges [2]. It takes approximately one to three years to be developed, but once this has been accomplished, an outstanding position in the community will be assured. The practice will attract patients interested in health and optimal dental care. It is on the patients then that the dentists should focus instead of focusing on the competition. All the information above gives the dentist a deep understanding of what today's patients want from an optimum dental health care facility and the knowledge that a successful practice is "branded" by his choices, his actions and his earned reputation.

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## 11. Conclusion

Branding is the new entity for successful business. Dental branding is essential in after COVID-19 era since it evaluates the strength and weaknesses of a professional and promotes practice excellence in all fields of management. Dental blogs, videos, media presence and email marketing are modern effective ways of dental branding that a professional should be educated about.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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