



SEATTLE STUDY CLUB®

The Best Marketing Strategy

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I am often asked for the one idea, the best pearl, the single most effective strategy for marketing an oral surgery/periodontal practice. I usually explain that marketing involves multiple focused activities and that pulling one thread out of the marketing fabric may unravel an otherwise tightly woven plan. When pressed on this issue, however, I do have an answer that is not a one-shot activity but an entire philosophy that fits under a single heading: "Seattle Study Club."

I have been here in Key Biscayne, Florida attending the Seattle Study Club Symposium. It's been an incredible week—intellectually stimulating, fun, personally fulfilling and filled with top-notch entertainment and surprises.

The Seattle Study Club is a network of study clubs across North America that is expanding into Australia. There are now 160 (update 2008: 215) Seattle Study Clubs with a combined membership of approximately 4,000 (update 2008: 6,500) dentists. If the staff who work for these dentists are included—and they must be—then the Seattle Study Club involves 20,000 (update 2008: 35,000) individuals. I have had the pleasure of working with many Seattle Study Clubs and I can tell you that this is a first-class organization.

Although not every case is a big case and some treatment plans are necessarily conservative, the philosophy is to encourage study club directors and members to look at the big picture and to get beyond single tooth dentistry. In this regard, the Seattle Study Club is philosophically compatible with that of Pankey and Dawson. One of the major differences is that dentists usually have to travel to take courses sponsored by these other world renowned continuing education providers, but the Seattle Study Club brings most of its courses to the members' backyard.

The key to the success of the Seattle Study Club network is that it fosters relationships and involves dentists in interactive learning activities. This approach is clearly superior to the now outdated model of limiting outreach activities to taking dentists to lunch or sending a "mass mailing" to all dentists in the area in the hopes that someone will respond and refer a patient. Lunch meetings do have their place, but they work best when they foster long-term relationships. Sending out mailings to hundreds of dentists in the community is of dubious value, because dentists rarely refer a patient to a sheet of paper. Dentists understandably want to meet the oral surgeon or periodontist and become comfortable with his or her approach to patients and treatment.

Seattle Study Club meetings include lectures but emphasis is placed on clinical treatment planning sessions. I recently attended one of these sessions and I was impressed by the high degree of involvement evident among the members. The format of these sessions varies, but for this particular meeting, a number of doctors presented challenging cases that had not yet been treated.

There was spirited discussion among the group regarding various treatment options. I was struck by the collegiality of the meeting, and the total absence of artifice. The dentists had grown to know each other

over time, they were united by a common bond of working out treatment options for the cases presented, and they obviously respected each other's abilities. I have been to other study clubs that are not part of the Seattle Study Club network, and I have occasionally observed that a course is put on for the benefit of dentists who are only passive attendees. In the Seattle Study Club setting, however, the members are continually encouraged and engaged, and they develop strong ties with each other and the director.

This type of easy camaraderie does not develop overnight, of course. As with any worthwhile endeavor, the Seattle Study Club requires a commitment of time and effort. However, oral surgeons and periodontists who serve as study club directors have all the advantages of a proven network at their disposal. New clubs receive detailed guidance from the organization's founder and leader, Dr. Michael Cohen. In fact, Dr. Cohen personally visits each new club in its first year to give a clinical presentation that also explains the club philosophy to members and their staff. Over time, there is ongoing communication between the Seattle office and individual clubs to assist with curriculum development, meeting planning, relationship building, practice enhancement, and numerous other issues.

To learn how you can start a Seattle Study Club in your area, call 425.576.8000, mention this article, and ask for Greg Tice. All of your questions will be answered and you will receive information on the mechanics of starting and running a club.

The Seattle Study Club only allows one club in a specific geographic area so that clubs do not compete directly with one another for members. If the periodontist or oral and maxillofacial surgeon across the street from you starts a Seattle Study Club, you will no longer have the option of starting your own club. If someone else gets there first, don't say I didn't warn you.