‘Focus is extremely important in a start-up’

By Daniel Zimmermann, Group Editor Dental Tribune International

With the sale of business.com for $345 million in 2007, entrepreneur Jake Winebaum made headlines with one of the largest Internet transactions of all time. Prior to that, the 52-year-old sports fanatic helped to manage the transition of large corporations such as Time Warner and the Disney Company with no Internet presence from offline to online.

His newest project, www.brighter.com, is a website dedicated to dental discounts. Dental Tribune Group Editor Daniel Zimmermann spoke with him about the project and how it addresses the biggest challenge for dental patients nowadays in the United States.

You have a long and impressive track record in the Internet business. Could you tell us how, as a former Disney and Time Warner executive, you ended up in dentistry?

The idea for brighter.com originated at a dinner with relatives. My father-in-law had just returned from his dentist and was told he needed some implants for a sum of $6,000. Since he is retired and has no dental insurance, he asked me whether I thought that was a fair price. After some research on the Internet, I found very little information on what dental procedures actually cost.

In addition, I discovered that, like him, nearly 90 percent of Americans lacked dental insurance, almost four times the number who lack general health-care insurance. In the U.S., almost $45 billion is spent on dental care each year with little or no price transparency or negotiating leverage. I thought there was a good business opportunity in empowering these uninsured consumers to save on their dental costs at trusted dentists.

Could you explain the business model and how dentists are able to join the network?

Brighter.com provides pre-negotiated fees on all dental procedures across a network of 25,000 dentists nationwide. We have partnered with Careington International, a Frisco-based marketer of medical and dental saving plans, to provide this network. The discounts range from 20 percent off cosmetic procedures up to as much as 60 percent off preventative and restorative dental procedures.

Patients pay brighter.com an annual membership fee to enroll in the network and thereby gain access to the discounted fees. Dentists who are interested in participating can contact us either by phone or by filling out a simple form on the website to get the process started.

How do you get your information and how many people are working for the site?

We have approximately 20 people working on the site right now. What they do is to collect pricing and practice data from different sources to allow consumers to know what procedures should cost before they visit a dentist. This data comes from market surveys, as well as from the dentists themselves.

The site aims to make costs for dental treatment more transparent. Do you have a rating system?

The three factors that are most important in a patient selecting a dentist are price, proximity and reputation. Brighter.com provides a simple way for consumers to compare dentists near them by both price and reputation.

There are hardly any discount websites for medical procedures. What makes dentistry different?

Dentistry is a somewhat simpler problem to solve than general health care. Most practices are owned by the provider, the dentist, who is also the decision-maker on pricing and discounts. Consumers also pay a much higher percentage of dental costs out-of-pocket than in other health-care areas, so discounts are particularly important in attracting patients.

Google recently announced that it was to discontinue its online patient information network owing to low interest. How do you aim to attract consumers (dental patients) to the site?

Google’s initiative was to consolidate patient medical records in one place online. However, this wasn’t the consumers’ most pressing need. The biggest challenge for patients here in the United States is affording the care they need.

Brighter.com has been recognized by dentists, patients and the press as a simple way to save on dental costs. So the word is already getting out and we are seeing steady growth in our site visits and members. In 2007, you sold www.business.com to R. H. Donnelly in a multimillion-dollar transaction that was overshadowed by the company’s bankruptcy a year later. What did you learn from this experience?

R.H. Donnelly, now Dex One, is a large Yellow Pages publisher and that industry, like many others, is challenged by the combination of tough economic conditions and the transition of their audience to the Internet. People are increasingly turning online for tasks they used to use the Yellow Pages for. That is certainly the case with dentistry, with over 16 million searches for dentists occurring on Google every month. This presents a challenge for private practitioners because the Internet is very difficult to target at the hyper-local level necessary for finding a dentist. That is why a company like brighter.com will help not just the consumers, but also dentists connect with new patients.

Do you plan to extend www.brighter.com to other fields in health care or to other countries?

Right now, the focus is exclusively on dental although the model does make sense in other health-care fields. I have learned that focus is extremely important in a start-up.

Most young companies die from indigestion rather than starvation so we will likely stay within dentistry for the near future. We are trying to solve a very significant consumer issue, affordability of dental care, and that should keep us very busy.

Do you use www.brighter.com yourself?

Absolutely. My father-in-law immediately got a better deal for his implants using the site. I also found a great new dentist, who gave me a perfect dental experience, and helped me to save a couple hundred dollars on my first visit.

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