Protect your position in the mouthguard world

Hosting a mouthguard event for local athletes can raise the visibility of your practice and increase community goodwill. To make it more fun for participants, provide food and drinks (or consider asking local restaurants to partner with you to serve food), and encourage your staff to dress in team colors.
You thought I was going to say the best choice for orthodontic treatment, didn’t you?

Let’s think about this for a minute. A mouthguard is a specially designed removable oral appliance, in either generic or custom form, designed to be comfortably worn for several hours to prevent damage to the teeth and soft tissue of the mouth. Which dental provider most frequently delivers removable appliances and does an amazing job of it? Go ahead and toot your own horn! It’s time to put aside your inner self-hating orthodontic voice and come out and scream to the world, “I am the master of my domain!” Doesn’t that feel good?

Moving on. …As orthodontists, we know that our ability to make positive relationships with patients, parents and referring dentists is the cornerstone of our business. Those relationships are built on our ability to create dramatic cosmetic and functional changes for our patients. In this supremely competitive market, we’re often in search of a way to expand those relationships. Common examples are volunteering, bagel runs to referring dental offices, giving oral hygiene presentations at schools, and marketing.

A mouthguard event is a phenomenal way to show off your team’s skills, excellent customer service and desire to contribute knowledge to benefit the community. We’ve hosted mouthguard events in our office for the past five years, and it’s been one of the best relationship- and practice-building events in our annual marketing calendar.

Choose a sport to support

The first step in planning a mouthguard event is to choose a sport. Although most offices choose to support football, any sport where there’s contact between athletes, or a chance of facial injury, is a great one to support. Choose one that best matches your interests or your staff’s interests, or one that’s popular in your community—think hockey, lacrosse, basketball, soccer, martial arts, wrestling, boxing, weightlifting and mountain biking.

From experience, I recommend that you start small, execute the event, then build from there. We overextended our first year and offered to make custom mouthguards for three local varsity football teams … and my small orthodontic team ended up making more than 150 custom mouthguards in a two-week span. We learned a lot that year. Since then, we choose a maximum of two teams per year and accept others schools on a waitlist.

Choose a mouthguard style

There are basically two choices in this category, but the extent of your time and financial involvement will depend on choosing to deliver either custom or over-the-counter mouthguards.

I’ve heard great stories about orthodontic offices that deliver over-the-counter (noncustom) mouthguards. You can reach a larger population in your community; your event will cost less and be easier to plan because it has fewer moving parts and less team involvement; the cost of materials may be slightly less, and there certainly is less labor involved. By delivering free or
reduced-fee over-the-counter mouthguards, you can create tremendous goodwill in the community and quickly become known as the orthodontist who cares about protecting athletes’ teeth.

Delivering custom mouthguards has its pros and cons. With custom mouthguards you give athletes the best-quality and most protective mouthguard available. Athletes can’t buy this quality of mouthguard in stores, because it requires an impression to fabricate. These mouthguards can be customized with a team logo and the athlete’s name and number. My experience is that once an athlete tries on a custom mouthguard, they’ll never return to an over-the-counter one again.

One negative of providing custom mouthguards is the additional time and staffing commitment to making this event work. In our office we use the Essix Drufomat machine, and the material costs for a custom mouthguard are about $12 per athlete. The athlete must come in to the office for an impression, then return for the delivery.

Our office has been involved in making custom mouthguard for athletes for more than 10 years. We follow the recipe from Dr. Ray Padilla’s article in the CDA Journal for creating positive-pressure laminated thermoformed mouthguards. These are the same mouthguards that are used in the NFL and NBA.

As orthodontists, we know how excited patients get about choosing colors and customizing their appliances. These mouthguards can be customized in thickness to match the sport, as well as with colors, logos, and text. The mouthguards also fit like a retainer, intimately adapted to all of the details of the teeth.

Once you’ve chosen the type of mouthguard you’ll deliver in a mouthguard event, it’s time to plan the event.

**Brainstorm with your team**

Each year that we plan our mouthguard events, we get a little more involved and a little smarter. The first thing to do is have a planning meeting with your team. The staff should understand the reasons why you’re committing time, effort and finances to the cause, and should be able to explain to athletes (and their families) why the doctor believes mouthguards are so important, so they can understand, too.

Mouthguard events are meant to be fun! Here are the essentials we need to know to plan our events:

- **Calendar.** To decide when we host the event and when the athletes need their mouthguards.
- **Logistics.** To decide where we host the event (our office or offsite); ordering mouthguard supplies and marketing materials; and ordering supplies for the day of the event.
- **Event.** Decorate in team colors; ask the coach if there’s a trophy or banner that could be placed on-site; invite the booster club and cheerleaders; place signs outside so athletes know where to go; have staff dress in team colors; provide food and drinks.
- **Contact.** Designate a person who’ll work with the coaches and booster clubs on scheduling and answering questions from athletes or parents.

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Host the event

OK, it’s the big game for the orthodontic office team! Hopefully all of your planning has prepared you for 40, 50, 100 or 1,000 athletes to get their mouthguards. Have fun with it! Make sure everyone on your team has a smile on and is prepared to answer questions … because there will always be questions, including:

- How long will these last?
- Do you have them in another color?
- How about one for my friend’s kid?
- What if I have braces?
- What if I lose it?
- What if my dog chews it?
- What if my other orthodontist told me I can’t wear this kind?

It’s important that the orthodontist makes his rounds and meets and greets every patient. What an amazing opportunity to get your face, voice and personality in front of a large group of guests who are grateful for your contributions! It’s important to recognize that the goodwill from such an event goes far beyond the athletes who receive mouthguards. If nothing else comes from this event, if you don’t even get one single new orthodontic patient—and I bet you will!—you’ll quickly become known as the generous doctor who cares about athletes and their teeth. This goes a long way.

Each athlete should leave your office with a few important things. We create a small bag that includes the mouthguard and case, an office business card, lip balm with SPF 15, a card with frequently asked questions, and a special offer for participants of the event. In the past, we’ve offered discounts on orthodontic treatment for anyone in the family, whitening discounts, etc.

Follow up

After the mouthguards have been delivered and the season has started, it’s important to follow up. In my
experience, the best person to follow up with is the head of the booster club. The coaches are busy, so the booster club is where things get done and they’re an excellent connection. You may want to ask questions about how the mouthguards are fitting. You can ask the athletes and parents about the event’s perception. You should ask if there are things you can do better next season. Finally, if you feel the event went well, you can ask to repeat the event for the next season. There are a lot of things that can be learned and improved upon for future events.

It’s also a great idea to have a follow-up meeting with your team. Generate a discussion from their perspective. Often we’ll hear comments from parents that don’t make it to the doctor. We frequently hear things like, “This is so nice,” “You guys are great” and “I really need to get my teeth straightened.”

**Conclusion**

From a marketing perspective, what I’ve described is just the beginning of a process that you can leverage in your practice for even greater success. A few ideas to expand the reach of the event:

- Join up with a nearby dentist to share the costs and expand the marketing opportunities.
- Ask local businesses to support the event with food (restaurants) or supplies (sporting goods stores, dental-supply companies).
- Ask athletes for testimonials.
- Trade mouthguards for marketing on the team’s website and programs, or with a banner.
- Collect email addresses from the athletes and their families, and send them carefully curated information about mouthguards and oral injuries. Feature a local athlete as your player of the month. Make an occasional offer for orthodontic treatment.

It’s time for orthodontists to guard their position in the mouthguard world! Create an event for your community and show off your office, your team and your support for oral care and protection.

The goodwill from a mouthguard event goes far beyond the athletes who receive them. If nothing else, you’ll become known as the generous doctor who cares about athletes and their teeth. This goes a long way.

What’s your experience with holding community events? Creating custom mouthguards? Comment on this article at orthotown.com/magazine.