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Searching for You

Strategies for Turning Online Searchers into Patients

BY BECKY SHEETZ-RUNKLE

The Internet is fertile ground for dentists looking to acquire new patients, and for patients looking to find a great, new dentist. Until recently, dentists just needed a nice website to get patients' attention and encourage them to make an appointment. Today, there are many other influential resources. This is a challenge—and an opportunity—for dentists.

Patients are evaluating dentists via the Internet. That's far from a new development. The new development, however, is that patients are now going online to look at much more than a dentist's website. "Statistics show that 44 percent of people look online for information about dentists and other health professionals," says David Goldstein, president of Health Options Worldwide, which connects patients with health care professionals.

Today, a successful Web strategy is about much more than having a website, even a good website. There are other factors at play, especially as the marketing landscape has changed so dramatically. This article explores the following four strategies and weighs their influence:

- Search engine optimization
- Google Places
- Online directories/review sites
- Pay-per-click advertising

Search engine optimization

Search engine optimization (SEO) is fundamental for a successful Web marketing strategy. To take advantage of SEO, dentists and Web experts with whom they work must think like patients. "The key with search engine optimization is that patients typically are not searching for a dentist by his or her name," says Goldstein. "Instead, they are searching for a condition that

is affecting them, a potential treatment option, or for a dentist in a specific location."

Google and other search engines compare and rank websites based on factors such as original content and the use of keywords within the website. So, all things being equal, for a patient searching for "root canal in NYC," the dentist with an entire page dedicated to doing root canals in New York City typically will be ranked higher than the dentist whose site speaks about general practice, Goldstein says.

Jeffrey Haddad, DDS, of Rochester Advanced Dentistry in Rochester, Mich., saw a major improvement in his practice's website performance when he implemented an SEO keyword strategy. "We became a lot more visible based on that strategy," he says. "And, the key to a good website and good SEO is content." Dr. Haddad is careful to utilize that same smart keyword optimization in other aspects of his office's Web marketing, including social media, blogs, and video.

Google Places

There is no substitute for being found on Google. It's absolutely critical. But, as with all things related to Web marketing, Google's method of searching websites is ever-evolving, making it easier for online searchers to find goods and services in their areas—without having to enter their location. "Google changed its entire localized search results last October, resulting in the launch of Google Places. Now, when a patient from the town of Springfield, for example, searches for a local dentist, Google will automatically serve up only results based in Springfield," says Greg Lombardi, president of Officite, a medical and dental Web design firm.

The influence of Google Places is quite significant. Lombardi calls it "a mini website inside

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of Google." This is because business owners can post information about their practices with such details as payments accepted, insurance and financing information, specialties, parking details, and more. These are the types of factors patients consider when evaluating dentists. Dentists can even post photos and videos of the practice. But, perhaps most importantly, Google Places compiles and displays patient reviews from both Google and third-party sites like Yelp, City Search, Insider Pages, and Angie's List. Lombardi says these reviews are somewhat random, but can be very prominent and influential. They even come up on Yahoo! and Bing searches.

Google Places is another area in which dentists need to focus their marketing attention. Given its prominence and influence, Lombardi believes it's well worth the time invested—it's worth the cost, too, as Google Places is free. The good news for dentists with quality websites is that a website's level of sophistication is a major indicator in determining its ranking in Google Places. Higher, of course, is better.

Online directories and review sites

Google Places is far from the only review site in these Web 2.0 days. Review sites are everywhere, for products and services ranging from grocery stores to car dealerships. But just how important are these reviews for dentists? Very important,

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according to Lombardi. "That's where dentists need to spend their efforts," he explains. He believes dentists need a review strategy for sites such as Google Places, Yelp, City Search, Insider Pages, and Angie's List. That's because patients are searching through all of these sites before making an appointment.

There are many online directories for dentists and specialists that range from free to paid. Many of these directories include reviews by patients. Lombardi recommends consumer-based directories like Yelp and City Search more than smaller sites that are specific to dentists. "These smaller directories aren't as popular with users," he says. Instead, patients are using the major consumer sites.

Dr. Haddad notes a bit of caution about your reaction to the reviews on these sites. It's important for dentists to note, for example, that any user can post any review, and that their experiences aren't validated by the website or any other source. "I think reviews are great, but I think doctors need to be prepared, because anybody can write anything. It's important to be aware

that there will be negativity among those unfiltered reviews," he says. For this reason, Dr. Haddad focuses his marketing efforts on building website content and connecting with patients—and potential patients—with social media that can be filtered, as opposed to worrying himself over reviews from patients that may not be very positive.

He and his team also post positive patient testimonials they find on the practice's website and on Facebook. "A positive testimonial on my site is going to help my ranking and a positive comment on my social media page is going to be found in an organic search," says Dr. Haddad. In this way, these testimonials continue to impact SEO. Before using testimonials, however, cautions Lombardi, dentists should first check with their state associations, because different states have different rules on gathering and using patient testimonials.

Scott Finlay, DDS, of Scott Finlay & Associates in Annapolis, Md., participates in what he describes as "some limited online directories," because he believes they drive inbound leads to his website. Links from other websites are another element important for SEO.

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Whether dentists employ a broad strategy like Lombardi recommends, or a more targeted and vetted strategy like Dr. Haddad's, dentists should be actively encouraging patients to submit testimonials. Lombardi recommends dentists give patients a card with instructions on how to post a review at home. Practices also can set up a direct link on their websites to the influential review pages. Tech-savvy patients may even choose to post a review by clicking through the website on their smartphone while standing in the office. Dentists should encourage all of these options.

Wolfe agrees in the importance of engaging patients and encouraging them to write reviews. It takes time, but it's a low-cost option. "Dentists also can put together a small postcard or a little plaque in the office that encourages patient reviews," he notes.

Staying competitive

Another important reality to consider is that there are other dentists out there whose names are going to turn up when someone searches for a dentist. Every month there are between 40,000 and 50,000 Web inquiries from people looking for dental services in the greater Chicagoland region alone, says Justin Wolfe, director of marketing and business development for Manus Dental, a Chicago-based practice management company. With so many dentists vying for these patients, dentists need to be competitive. According to Wolfe, inclusion in directories and review sites are ways in which to do that.

"Patients are much more tech-savvy than they've ever been," Wolfe says. "Nearly everyone has a Blackberry, an iPhone, a laptop. Doctors used to be able to hang a sign in the window that said 'open

for business,' and patients would come. Now people are research-focused. They want to know about the doctor, his or her philosophy, his or her equipment. They also want to hear from other people who have been to the practice." As a way to give those patients a great virtual first impression, he recommends dentists consider taking advantage of the paid advertising options in directories like Yelp, City Search, and DR. Oogle, in addition to submitting their information to the directories.

Pay-per-click advertising

Pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, such as Google Adwords, is a method of advertising within Web browsers and websites. Searchers are able to key in a product or a service and will quickly see prominently displayed, sponsored links. These advertisers have paid for that prominence. This is a technique that has shifted in practice and importance in recent years for dentists.

"From our experience, this strategy is great to generate traffic to a dentist's website, but it has not been successful in creating new patients," Goldstein says. According to Goldstein, PPC generates a small, overall volume of website traffic when compared to organic search results. Organic search results appear based on their relevance to words being searched, rather than as paid advertisements. Organic search results are "earned" rather than "bought"—they happen organically, in other words.

Wolfe's experiences have been similar. "We've done a lot of pay-per-click with pretty limited results," he says. For dentists with a budget, he recommends trying it, but only after they've focused on utilizing patient reviews and optimizing their websites.

"I think people know those are paid ads," Wolfe says. "There are other places where dentists should spend their money first." He explains that, in a region like downtown Chicago, so many dentists are engaging in PPC that the cost per click is relatively high. "It may make sense for doctors who focus on selling an expensive treatment like dental implants. But for general dentists in a competitive market, it's really expensive," Wolfe says.

An advantage of PPC is that dentists who pay for ads will also appear at the top of website pages like the coveted Google Places. Dr. Finlay does some PPC advertising but prefers to "develop the organic content of the site so that it can stand on its own merit. Pay-per-click is a nice way to get patients to your site, but if the site lacks the information that they want, then they won't stay there long and those shoppers won't be converted," he says.

While PPC advertising may make sense for some, it's viewed less favorably for most general dentists. However, the experts agree that broad SEO, Google Places, and online directories and review sites are worth the time and effort for dentists who want to drive patients to their websites.

It is clear that, in order to develop and maintain a loyal and growing patient base, dentists must take advantage of the opportunities afforded by Web marketing. Not every dentist needs to forge ahead and implement each of these strategies right away, but each deserves consideration and analysis. This is especially the case with SEO—the experts agree that it is essential. Prospective patients are looking for a dentist in your neighborhood. Are they finding you? ♦

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