

## SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

# Choose to be The Village Dentist

## Frith Maier



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Frith Maier is founder and CEO of Sesame Communications. She has helped about a thousand dental and specialty practices transform themselves through technology. She writes and lectures frequently about online communications.

The World Wide Web creates modern villages. Your current patient base holds the potential to grow your practice to any size.

What dentist has the luxury of not worrying about where his next 50 patients will come from? The dentist who practices in a town so small it can only support one dentist: the village dentist. (Of course, this village dentist has against him the fact that there aren't 50 new patients to attract.) Now the good news: regardless how many dentists within a mile radius are competing with you for patients, you can *choose* to be a village dentist by tapping into the power of networking afforded by the World Wide Web.

Human communication is soft and fuzzy. Even though they do not teach this in dental school, you know that practice success is about much more than clinical excellence. We choose to do business with people we like, who treat us respectfully, and make us feel valued. The web has become ubiquitous, and it gives you a new channel to show your patients respect and appreciation.

More than three quarters of your patients are online daily; in many metropolitan areas, the figure is greater than 90%. Your patients need information from you when they are out of your office. They need to check the date on their kid's next scheduled appointment (lost that appointment slip, naturally) and to understand what their insurance has paid. If you use practice management software, these answers are there and can be delivered to your patients through your website automatically, without any data entry by your staff. Your outgoing message can tell callers, "For instant answers, please log onto

our website at [www.grandcanyonsmiles.com](http://www.grandcanyonsmiles.com)."

This may seem counterintuitive: send my patients to a website instead of letting them talk to my pleasant, helpful receptionist? Isn't that the opposite of soft and fuzzy? We tend to think of technology as impersonal because many computer programs and web applications are not people-friendly. However, smart technology *facilitates* human interaction.

No matter how great that receptionist is, she does not work around the clock. All too often, your patients want information from you when your office is closed. If you are making them leave messages, or call back during business hours, you are not giving them the best service you could. Even when you are open for business, it turns out that your patients would rather go online for information than call your office.

Sesame Communications has compiled surveys of more than 30,000 dental patients. Overwhelmingly, these patients report that for answers about their account, appointments, and treatment it is more convenient for them to go online than to call your office. Understanding this can fundamentally change your practice in a very positive way.

Your patients prefer to check their appointment schedule and insurance payments online. Give them the opportunity, and they choose to pay you online and print from your website the payment report for their Flex Plan.

Consumers have come to expect round-the-clock, anywhere access to information.

Think about your own experience with service providers. You do not call your broker anymore to check on how your portfolio is doing, do you? Chances are you click through on the stock trading web page when you have a minute between patients. You are busy, and you choose instant information instead of having to wait on hold or wait for a return call. Your patients like online answers from you for the same reasons. Most of them also prefer that you send their appointment reminder by e-mail or text messaging directly to their phone. That is how they manage their lives. They will be delighted to see your pleasant, helpful receptionist when they come in for their appointment, but they would rather interact with your smart website when they are looking for information between visits.

Give your patients 24/7 access to information they need, and you give them the message that their time is valuable. You show that you respect their crazy schedule. You make them feel grateful. And that gives them a reason to be loyal to your practice. Patient retention is much less expensive than new patient acquisition, and the Internet allows you to dramatically improve your patients' experience.

There is a second important way that online communications will change your practice for the better. In his best-seller *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell writes about "mavens," a word that comes from the Yiddish—one who accumulates knowledge. Mavens, in Gladwell's book, are people genetically predisposed to tell their friends about ideas, products, and services they love. When

you go the extra mile to show patients you care about their busy lives, you give the mavens in your practice something to rave about. These "marketplace helpers" will start word-of-mouth brush fires for you.

You make it easy for mavens to share the word about your practice because you have a terrific website. What makes a dental website terrific? Your site conveys what your practice is all about, and why you are more than just another dentist in a white jacket. It expresses the personal passion, attributes, and achievements that set you apart from the crowd. It makes viewers feel at home.

Doctors who use the Dental Sesame service make it easy for mavens to pass along their name and web address through a myriad of e-mail communications that inspire sharing with friends. Patients receive a quarterly e-newsletter with fun news and information that reminds them of the reasons they made a great choice of dentist. For example, Dr. John McDonald's newsletter invited patients to click and "send your friends an ice cream bar. Tell them we're cool and have them drop by to pick up a cool treat from our ice cream freezer." Another way that Dental Sesame makes it fun for patients to refer is by letting Invisalign patients send their treatment movies to friends. The web helps you stay in much better touch with your patients and makes them feel like family. After all, that's how you want them to feel about you!

In summary, the fact that your patients are online—and interacting online with their friends, neighbors, and colleagues—is your opportunity to be

the dentist to their virtual village, by using smart web technology to improve their patient experience. Give your patients convenience and reach out to them the way they communicate now—online. This makes patients want to tell their online network about you. It is much easier, and less costly, to change your practice's internal "marketing" than it is to outspend your competition at advertising and direct mail. You do not *need* to spend thousands of dollars on marketing when you tap into the web's networking power.

Why wait until someone needs a dentist and grabs the address nearest to their ZIP code in an online search? There is no need to limit your new patient acquisition to people who are new in town or who become dissatisfied with their current dentist. You can mine the gold within your own practice instead of constantly worrying about drumming up new business. It is time to stop obsessing about all the dentists nearby competing for patients and start showing your patients more of the love and respect that makes them loyal to you. Use the web to give them exceptional customer service, and make it fun and easy for them to refer friends. It is the village approach to modern practice community building. High tech does not displace personal service; it *facilitates* communications. Your current patient base holds the potential to grow your practice to any size.

So look at the first patient you see after you put down this article. This person can be the source of 5 new patients, or 50. Just get her e-mail address!