

## Effective websites: leveraging the Internet to grow your practice

Dr. Lou Shuman and Diana P. Friedman help dentists navigate Internet marketing strategies that make practices click with patients



Use of the Internet has exploded in the last decade with more than 2 billion users worldwide, including 272 million in North America alone.<sup>1</sup> This equates to roughly 4 out of 5 people using the Internet on a daily basis as a means to search for service providers, learn about products, and communicate.

The Internet has introduced a new paradigm. It has drastically changed how consumers seek, evaluate, and communicate on every level, including interactions with service providers. Google®, Bing® and Yelp® have replaced the Yellow Pages® as the lead sources of information. Word-of-mouth and referrals have transformed from neighborly conversations to email and instant messaging, including mass broadcasting using social media channels such as blogs, forums, Twitter®, Facebook® and YouTube®. With 81% of Americans between the ages of 30-49 online daily,<sup>2</sup> these changes have impacted all industries, and dentistry is not immune to these transitions.

### The Internet and dentistry

Today, consumers are making better, more educated choices regarding the selection of a dental provider and available treatment options. Patients are increasingly leveraging the Internet to learn more, becoming more knowledgeable, researching treatment options, reading patient feedback and comments, and logging into online practice communications.

Dentistry is a highly ethical and conservative profession that has typically distanced itself from advertising and mass marketing. However, with the emergence of the digital age, coupled with the recent economic slowdown, promotion and marketing are no longer an option, but an economic necessity. With more than 100 million consumers using the Internet to seek healthcare information each year,<sup>3</sup> a dental or specialty practice without an online presence is essentially invisible to potential patients seeking oral care providers.

In a highly competitive and tight economic environment, the success of your dental or specialty practice depends on your ability to be quickly and easily discovered and selected by new patients. Equally important is your ability to establish, retain, and further strengthen relationships with existing patients. Your practice must have an effective and comprehensive online communication strategy that includes the complete patient life cycle—from new patient acquisition through treatment completion to referrals. And you need to implement such a strategy where your patients are—online 24/7.

According to a recent Sesame Communications survey, 92.83% dental patients would rather click than call their practices to find information and communicate.<sup>4</sup> The time to address the world of online patient preferences and to take action to become part of the digital age of dentistry is now.

An effective online patient connection system needs to integrate several core elements in order to optimize your practice brand visibility, efficiencies, and effectiveness. These

core elements include a well-optimized website, mobile site, social media, online marketing, online 24/7 patient login functionality, automated digital reminders, and a HIPAA-secure online clinical collaboration platform. Combined, these essential elements afford your practice an effective 360-degree connection to your market.

### Be discovered

*Your practice website: the cornerstone of online visibility and the engine driving new patient acquisition*

Driving down a US highway at 60 mph, a billboard 1 mile away has 60 seconds for its message to resonate with you as a consumer. With the global average time of approximately 8 seconds to capture a website visitor,<sup>5</sup> your practice website has literally only a few seconds to effectively deliver a message that resonates with online prospective patients. In those seconds, your site must then motivate the visitor to further engage if you want to successfully convert consumers to new patients.

In a Sesame Communications study in partnership with Resolution Research, participants spent less time on practice websites that were difficult to navigate, failed to provide meaningful content, incorporated splash pages, music, or took too long to load. Additionally, it took only 90 seconds for website visitors to decide if they were going to contact the practice or not. Mobile websites seem to engage users longer with patients, averaging 2 minutes and 51 seconds on the site, 143% longer than the average time spent on non-mobile-optimized sites.<sup>6</sup>

With just seconds to capture the attention of your audience, your practice website presentation and content must make every second count to encourage a site visitor to engage and set an appointment.

### Effective websites for new patient acquisition

Creating a website can be an arduous undertaking. Wading through the seemingly endless array of website design companies that have arisen to support the digital world of dentistry is exhausting. Some website design firms claim to create virtually instant websites. Some offer to coat your homepage with vivid animation while others promise that music will entertain and delight your website guests.

Unfortunately, a cookie-cutter website, animation, and music are not effective tools in converting a website visitor into a patient, especially when the clock is ticking with 90 seconds or less to take action.

### *So how do you know what will turn a visitor into new patient?*

The revolutionary research study performed by Sesame Communications was the foundation of the creation of a system to measure the Top Patient Appeal Rating™ of a practice website. This system evaluates 25 visual, kinesthetic,

# Practice management

and aural modality factors that were scientifically determined to make the difference in either bringing new patients into your practice or missing the opportunity to make a strong first impression.

The study involved one-on-one sessions where participants from across the country who were actively seeking a dental provider were asked to independently surf the Internet and give their feedback on various websites for local practices that appeared in their search results. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts on the websites and then answered questions regarding their likelihood of becoming a patient at each practice.

## Do special effects work?

As it turns out, the answer is, “No.” Patients are less interested in being entertained and more interested in receiving relevant information about your practice. The study found elements such as Flash® and sound to not only be ineffective in getting additional attention, but these elements actually deterred potential new patients from staying on your site long enough to choose your practice as their new dental care provider.

## What works?

Your website needs to be designed to what appeals to the patients you’re trying to attract, not according to your own personal taste. New patients want to believe that you truly care about their oral health, their experience will be personalized, and they will receive the highest quality of care. Even if a potential patient is considering your practice because of a word-of-mouth referral, they are still quite likely to visit your practice website to confirm that you will fulfill their needs. This is an opportunity to use your practice website as the starting point to a long-term relationship with your patients by effectively communicating your commitment to them.

Specific elements that attract new patients, and ultimately revenue for your practice, are simple. Demonstrate that your practice is warm and friendly through colorful images of doctors and staff with warm personal biographies. Make navigation easy so patients can find the information they seek quickly. Choose a website design that is clean, fresh, and modern. Use words that evoke feelings of comfort such as “friendly,” “family-oriented,” and “caring.” By doing so, you will join 95% of dentists and 99% of orthodontists who believe their website is important to the success of their practice.<sup>7</sup>



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Diana P. Friedman, MA, MBA, is President and Chief Executive Officer of Sesame Communications. She has a 20-year successful track record in marketing innovative technologies and fortifying brand positioning for dental companies in the professional and consumer markets. Throughout her career, Diana served as a recognized practice management consultant, speaker, and author. Diana holds an MBA in Management and Marketing as well as an MA in Sociology from Arizona State University.

## Go mobile

Nielsen estimates that the smartphone user base will reach 150 million,<sup>8</sup> and Forrester forecasts sales of more than 24 million Internet-enabled tablets<sup>9</sup> in 2011. In addition, a recent Pew study reported that 84% of smartphone users access the Internet using their phone.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that smartphones and tablets offer a significant opportunity for a dental or specialty practice to reach and engage on-the-go patients. So, once you have a solid website that attracts new patients, the next step is to optimize it for mobile platforms.

Your mobile website is specifically designed to render quickly and effectively on smart handheld devices. The content is also altered to ensure it quickly and easily provides prospective patients with important information such as contact details for your practice, general doctor and practice information, and links to your social media sites.

You can then promote your mobile website through the use of QR or “Quick Response” codes. These small square barcodes, when scanned by a smartphone, can be set to take the user directly to your mobile website. QR codes have exploded in popularity, with scans increasing an incredible 9,840%<sup>11</sup> since the second quarter of 2010. The time is now to begin leveraging this new technology in your practice. Make it easy for patients to connect with your mobile website by printing QR codes on your invoices, receipts, and follow-up instructions, your promotional items, and in-office signage.

## Seize the moment

Creating an appealing and fully optimized online presence is the first step in successfully marketing your practice. Research and in-depth planning are key to designing and building a website that will successfully engage and inspire users to initiate contact. With mere seconds to deliver a compelling message, a well-planned and impactful website will not only attract new patients, but will reaffirm your commitment to existing patients, strengthen your doctor-patient relationship, and further deepen patient loyalty. The 24/7 digital age of dentistry is here, and it’s time to seize the moment.

Note: To download a complimentary copy of the Website Patient Appeal Rating research study, please visit [www.sesamecommunications.com/education-research/whitepapers](http://www.sesamecommunications.com/education-research/whitepapers). ■

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