

The Patient Con

by Wm. Randol Womack, DDS, Board Certified Orthodontist
Editorial Director, *Orthotown Magazine*

Your Web site is often the first glimpse potential patients get of your practice. Sesame Communications pioneered online communications and marketing for the orthodontic profession, and prides itself on giving your patients good old-fashioned customer service by incorporating modern technology. Sesame's integration with your practice-management software is key in helping orthodontists manage relationships with patients while performing top-notch orthodontic treatment. Orthotown Magazine recently interviewed Sesame Founder and CEO Frith Maier and User Experience Manager Wendy Wallin to learn more about the company, now celebrating its 10th year, and the research that goes into developing orthodontic Web sites.

Would you give me a brief history on how Sesame Communications started, where the idea came from, and how you have grown?

Maier: This year, Sesame Communications is celebrating 10 years in service to the orthodontic profession. We were the first to build a tool to integrate practice management software systems with the Internet. We believed there was a better way to answer patients' questions and to give them the convenience of getting those answers any time of the day or night. Today, we offer professionally designed custom web sites that help doctors increase new patient flow, enhance patient communication, and provide secure account information. We also facilitate automated online payments, digital image and Invisalign viewing, and e-mail, phone, and text reminders. Sesame has the privilege of helping two million patients to connect with their dental providers – the majority of whom are orthodontists.

What is Sesame Communications doing to bring a higher degree of effectiveness to a doctor's Internet presence?

Maier: When a patient is looking at multiple doctors in a specific geographic area, we are always curious to know what would make them choose one over another. A lot of doctors are investing in nice Web sites and getting those Web sites to the top of the search engines. What we discovered is that

nobody had done the consumer research to find out what attributes of a Web site make a patient call one office for an appointment instead of another.

Wallin: After all, top search rankings are useless if your Web site is driving patients away. So, we put together a study to find out what Web site factors persuade patients to call a practice for an appointment, or to reject a practice and continue in their search. First, I used a recruiting firm to locate prospective patients across North America who were using the Internet to search for an orthodontist or dentist. We used a survey that was designed to keep prospects from knowing what the study was going to be about, to ensure that participants were in fact currently looking for an orthodontist or dentist. I split the study in half so we could study dental Web sites separately from orthodontic Web sites. Participants had to have a household income of more than \$60,000, be currently using the Internet in their search, and have a high-speed Internet connection. Then I did remote studies so that 20 prospective patients could look at Web sites in their own homes or offices, using specialized software called "UserVue" which allowed me to watch what they were doing on their computers, listen to their comments, and make video recordings of the sessions.

Prior to each study, I entered each participant's zip code and the word "orthodontist" or "dentist" in a Google search. The first 10 practice Web sites returned were put on a list for the participant to review, with each prospect reviewing as many as



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Sesame Communications Holds the Key to Driving New Patients Your Way



From left: Wendy Wallin, User Experience Manager; Jennifer Fisher, Art Director; Barbara Jacobucci, Search Marketing Director; and Frith Maier, CEO. Photograph by Loren Callahan

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possible in one hour. At the beginning of each study, I asked participants to think out loud as they reviewed each practice Web site and to let me know when they would normally leave the site. That triggered me to send them a survey rating the likelihood that they would call the practice for an appointment. Participants reviewed more than 120 sites, and the recordings and survey ratings gave us a wealth of information. We found a lot of consistency in what people were looking for in a Web site, what it was that got them excited about a practice, and what made them feel emotionally connected enough to make an appointment.

We conducted a variety of statistical analyses of the data, looking for factors that predicted site success and comparing the sites where consumers said they would be very likely to make an appointment and the sites where they said they wouldn't. This and our qualitative analysis revealed some significant patterns in what interested people in making appointments.

Maier: Guess where prospective patients look first when viewing an orthodontist's Web site? The doctor page. When a site succeeds in making a connection with the patient, the patient stays on the site and keeps reading. A major factor that was important in the site connecting emotionally with the patient was coming across as warm and personable. That means that they are looking for a photo that is friendly and not too buttoned-down and professional looking. They are looking for text about the doctor that shows them you really care about your patients. So now we are thinking about the design of an orthodontic Web site not from the perspective of whether it appeals to you, the doctor, but does it appeal to the population you are trying to prompt to call your office for an appointment?

What else did you learn from this research?

Wallin: Another important page is the staff or team page. They looked at the people who are going to be working with them in your practice, and there are some very definitive elements that the research showed worked best in staff photos and text. If the site succeeded in convincing the prospective patient that the doctor and the staff are warm and personable, they continued to explore the site. If the site turned them off, they were gone in 90 seconds. The next most important factor in attracting new patients is showing them that your practice is all about the patient. It's not about how smart, successful or famous you are. It's that you have their interests, their convenience and their comfort at the center of your mission. When a site succeeded at being warm and

personable and all about the patient, our research subjects stayed on the site for an average of almost five minutes.

Is this something that you are going to publish or do you just use this internally as you are designing things?

Maier: It really is a new way of thinking about developing orthodontic Web sites. It provides us a better understanding in a way that can quantitatively measure the "site appeal" to patients. Wendy's team has put together an objective scoring system that measures how your site performs. Patient Appeal Rating (PAR) is a measurement of your site's effectiveness with a prospective patient. This helps doctors understand whether they're getting their money's worth. When you invest in a site, you need assurance that it is driving the behavior that you want.

Did your research show up negative things about a Web site?

Wallin: Yes. We found that music doesn't work on a site. Flash pages that keep patients from quickly finding the answers they're looking for will drive them away. Hobby themes that appeal to the doctor are also not effective in getting a patient to call.

One of your "features" was listed as: "the all-inclusive solution for doctor to patient, but also doctor-to-doctor communication." Can you explain what doctor-to-doctor communication connectivity is?

Maier: If you use digital imaging, those diagnostic images that we are uploading and displaying for your patients are also available for you to share with colleagues. So when you have an interdisciplinary case and you need to confer with the GP, oral surgeon or other specialist, you can have a secure online discussion with any of those colleagues and have them view the images right from your imaging system. This doctor-to-doctor solution, Sesame Interactive, is assisting many of our Sesame members in saving them time and letting them get on the same page with their colleagues faster. They don't have to play phone tag, and they can authorize anyone that needs to weigh in with their opinion about the case to get on the same page quickly and start treatment faster. Everyone's production process can then be sped up.

How does one get this feature on their Web site if it is not there?



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Maier: If a doctor is showing patient images now, that means this is available. We offer training for using Sesame Interactive. There is no charge for it; it is included with your membership. It is quite a popular service. There are more than 17,000 dentists and orthodontists who are sharing images online through this program.

If I had it on my system, how would I make it work? What would I do?

Maier: Your images are only available to other dental colleagues whom you authorize. So you are able to securely display images to the doctors with whom you are treating a patient in common. They can see the images and they can post X-rays of their own. There is no cost for them to participate. This is a service that you can provide to your referring doctors, and any of you can post messages to the secure forum. This enables you to have all the discussion about a particular patient in one central secure location.

Economic times are not great right now. So if economics and expenses are an issue, is an Ortho Sesame investment cost effective?

Maier: Our company had its biggest month in December (2008). As doctors carefully scrutinize their expenses, it is more important for them to have the most cost effective marketing money can buy. Smart doctors recognize that they need to be investing in new case starts and investing in keeping the patients who are currently in the practice happy and satisfied. Patients are consumers of healthcare, and consumers today expect to get their information online. They expect e-mail reminders and/or text reminders, and the doctors who are providing those services have the competitive edge. We are seeing our membership increase as our doctors get really serious about running the most efficient practice they can.

A major feature of your service is enabling patients to securely register on the doctor's Web site. How many patients can an orthodontist expect to register on his Web site?

Maier: The high mark right now is 98 percent, and the average is more than three quarters of the active patients in a practice. We know that sometimes when a practice has had Ortho Sesame for a number of years that there may be new staff at the front desk or the staff has forgotten some of their e-mail registrations. So we offer a couple of different kinds of training: an online tutorial or a Webinar with a live trainer to help your staff remember. Your receptionist can open up the daily schedule in the morning when she comes in and see, as everybody walks in the door, if you have an e-mail address on file for them. If you don't, have her say to those patients, "Dr. Womack wants to be able to communicate with you,

and one of the ways we do that is with e-mail. Can you please give me your e-mail address?" We found this works very well.

Explain your Sesame Search feature to me.

Maier: If you had a Web site 10 years ago or even five years ago, you were considered "ahead of the curve." Most well-run orthodontic practices have a Web site today. So it is about making your Web site stand out. One of the ways we are helping our clients is with the design of those web sites. We talked about how important it is to have an "A" score Patient Appeal Rating. It is also important in a search to be seen in first place; you have to be doing well on search engines. We have advanced search management services for people in highly competitive areas. With a combination of tools that are making a site reach out, rather than waiting to be found by somebody Googling "Phoenix orthodontists," we are putting our doctors on MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, WebMD and other healthcare sites where we find prospective patients spending time. We are also managing blogs for doctors. All of these are creating a much wider net in which you can capture the attention of a potential patient, drive them back to your site, and get them to call for an appointment. Our advanced search management service is called Sesame Search 2.0, and there is a search marketing specialist managing all of these different social networking sites and your presence on them. In addition to the Sesame Search 2.0, which is managing your presence on social networking sites, we manage Google Ad Words campaigns, Pay-Per-Click campaigns, and the combination of the two is very effective.

Do you provide any service through Sesame that would provide video for someone's Web site?

Maier: We do add a lot of videos to Web sites that we design. Video can be an effective way to attract new patients and communicate the message on your Web site.

Invisalign is doing a big launch this year on the Invisalign Teen product. Is there something on Sesame for the Invisalign Teen product?

Maier: We are a step ahead of you. When you go in the Standard Emails section in your Ortho Sesame control panel, you will see that one of the prewritten articles there is about Invisalign Teen. It is called "Everyone's Smiling about Invisalign Teen." You can, with one click, send it out to anyone in the practice who is not already an Invisalign patient. So that is one great tool for promoting Invisalign Teen.

Frith and Wendy, thank you so much for your time to review Sesame Communications for our readers, and best wishes for a successful 10th anniversary year. ■

For more information about Sesame Communications, please visit www.sesamecommunications.com, or call 877-633-5193.