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Online Trends and Insights for the Dental Professional

How Consumers Choose Cosmetic Dentists Online

New research reveals startling web factors that influence a prospect's choice of a cosmetic dentist

As a cosmetic dentist, you've likely invested a lot in your web site and search engine marketing to make sure prospective patients find you online. You've put time and energy into designing a web site that "stands out," and your site might even rank consistently at the top of search results. But one annoying question still nags: Is your web site working to attract new patients?

To answer this question, Sesame's User Experience team recently conducted an online study to find out what web site factors cause prospective patients to choose one cosmetic dentistry practice over another online. The study and Whitepaper were created with important input and contributions from Dr. Mickey Bernstein, Dr. Jorge Blanco, and Dr. Mark Sayeg, accredited members of the AACD, and Nancy Lashley of Athena Marketing.

The Results: Of 88 practice web sites reviewed by prospective patients, **80% failed to persuade prospects to make appointments.**

The prevailing wisdom has been that cosmetic dentistry web sites must convey a sense of glamour, artistry, and Hollywood-style imagery to succeed in attracting new patients. Online enticements, from Internet coupons and newsletter pop-up ads to email contact forms on every page, have also been widely used to convince prospects to make appointments. The research shows that, to the contrary, **these strategies most frequently drive patients away.**

The web sites that earn calls from patients have several factors in common – and the good news is that these features are relatively easy to put in place. What cosmetic dentistry web sites really need in order to attract new patients is not a lot of flash and glam, but rather good content presented in a clear, easy-to-read format.

Web Site Factors That Drive Patients Away:

1. An overly "glam" site
2. Small-page Flash sites
3. Photos of models
4. Intro ("enter here") pages
5. Pop-ups
6. Hard-to-find menus and hard-to-scan pages

"The 'actual patients' look like models to me, so I'm not sure I believe they're actual patients."

Marie, Chicago

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Research Methods

Let's start with how the study was conducted. To ensure valid data, prospective patients were recruited from across the United States by Resolution Research (a reputable national market research firm), using a screening survey to ensure that they were in fact currently searching for a cosmetic dentist. Researchers compiled lists of web site addresses in each participant's geographic area based on the order in which the URLs came up on a Google search. No consideration was given to the company that designed the site.

At the beginning of each one-on-one session, the facilitator and participant were connected and recorded via telephone and Internet, using TechSmith UserVue software. The prospect was assured that the facilitator was not associated with any of the practices to be reviewed and had no input into the design of the sites. Participants were asked to think out loud as they navigated sites and to provide honest feedback, either positive or negative. They were instructed to spend only as much or as little time as they would normally on a site, and not to spend extra time on sites for the facilitator's benefit. Participant decisions to call for appointments were spontaneous and unsolicited.

The facilitator sent each participant one practice web site link at a time via a chat window. The prospect was then left alone to view the site as desired and asked to alert the facilitator when finished. The participant afterward received a link to a survey to answer the following questions.

What was your impression of this cosmetic dentist and this practice?

	Very bad	Somewhat bad	Neither good nor bad	Somewhat good	Very good
My impression is:	●	●	●	●	●

How likely are you to make an appointment with this cosmetic dentist/practice?

	Very unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I am:	●	●	●	●	●

At the end of each session, the prospect filled out a three-question survey about making an appointment with a cosmetic dentist. The results are shown to the right.

Participation Eligibility Requirements

- Currently searching for a cosmetic dentist online
- Between the ages of 21-59 (90% over 30)
- Household income of at least $60,000 (majority with $80,000 or more)
- Expect to make an appointment within 60 days (majority within 30)

Participant Appointment Survey

How will you contact the practice?

Email	20%
Telephone	80%

When you call, will you make an appointment, or get more information?

Make appointment	30%
Get info & make appt	20%
Get more information	50%

Do you expect to pay a fee for the initial consultation?

Yes	50%
No	50%

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Cosmetic Dentistry Shoppers Are Different

Perhaps the most surprising result of the study is how different cosmetic dentistry shoppers are from general dentistry and orthodontic shoppers. In two previous studies conducted by Sesame Communications*, prospective patients' primary concern was in finding a general dentist or orthodontist that seemed warm, friendly, and family-oriented. In contrast, cosmetic dentistry prospects are most interested in finding a doctor who has experience in solving their particular types of problems, demonstrated by the amount of information the web site provides on procedures and by the quality of before and after photos of the doctor's own cases. **While general dentistry and orthodontics shoppers are looking for a warm, friendly practice, cosmetic dentistry shoppers are looking for procedures.**

Information on Procedures

The first web page visited by prospective patients on general dentistry and orthodontic sites is almost invariably the doctor page. Not so on cosmetic dentistry sites; instead, prospects usually head straight for the procedures or services page. There, they look for specific information on what problems a procedure solves, what the procedure involves, and how long it takes. A lack of specific information translates to a perception that the doctor lacks expertise and typically sends the shopper on to another cosmetic dentist's web site.

Before and After Photos and Case Studies

Cosmetic dentistry prospects use before and after photos as a primary means of assessing the doctor's expertise. Practice web sites are far more likely to attract new patients if the site includes before and after photos that clearly show the dramatic results achieved by the doctor.

Before and after photos are most effective when combined with easy-to-read information about the problems solved. A note of caution, though: It's better to omit photos entirely than to show photos that don't clearly demonstrate excellent results. Prospects sometimes forgive the lack of photos if the web site is easy to use and answers all their questions. Once shoppers see an "after" photo that they think is bad, on the other hand, the practice is ruled out.

** See the Sesame Whitepaper "Get Found and Get Chosen" at www.sesamecommunications.com/thebuzz/news/press.php*

"Oh, wow, I like this. I like the pictures here – very nice. I really like the pictures."

Karen, Miami

"It doesn't have before and after, so it's hard to tell whose mouth is whose. I personally would prefer some of the others I've seen where they show you the person before, so you can get an idea of how good they are."

Kelli, Memphis

"The second picture doesn't look that great. It looks kind of yellow. The before and after pictures are not that good."

Angela, Minneapolis

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Cosmetic Dentistry Shoppers Are Impatient

Don't Make Me Think

Another surprising finding from the study is the impatience among cosmetic dentistry shoppers in getting to their desired information. Anything that slows consumers down or forces them to think about where to find information is likely to send them on to another site.

It's common knowledge that consumers' online expectations are rising as people become more accustomed to shopping online. On cosmetic dentistry sites, this expectation is dramatically increased. While prospective patients searching for general dentists and orthodontists are willing to look carefully at practice sites and invest a little time in finding desired information, cosmetic dentistry prospects want to find the content they're looking for now.

Web site features that can cause prospects to leave sites:

- **Intro pages** – *Force prospects to cross a hurdle to get to your site*
- **Flash sites with small page size** – *Don't provide enough space*
- **Pop-ups** – *Annoying and perceived by consumers as desperate*
- **Auto-play music & video** – *Send prospects scrambling to mute*

Where's the Beef?

The number one goal of prospective patients on cosmetic dentistry sites is to find information about the procedures available and how these procedures can help them with their cosmetic dentistry needs. Consumers care far less about how your site looks than how quickly the site design gets them to the information they're seeking. Sites with a simple design and prominent navigation menu were far more likely to gain calls from prospects than sites that devoted large amounts of real estate to extra-large photos, slide shows, and interactive features. Sites that bury the navigation lower on the page and sites with oversized headers separating the navigation menu from the content frustrate consumers and make a bad impression.

Web site features that make valuable content hard to find:

- **Hard-to-use menus** – *A clear menu close to page content is best*
- **Hard-to-read pages** – *Break up content with headers and photos*
- **Overwhelming content** – *Avoid too many links or too much text*
- **"Coming soon" signs** – *Add pages only when they're ready*

"I hate these kinds of intros. I don't have time… I just want to get to what I want to get to."

Marie, Seattle

This tiny window is all the space that small Flash sites allow for content, forcing prospects to scroll or click "Next" buttons incessantly; only a handful of sentences can be presented at a time:

"I don't like the window-in-a-window technique. It's too much work to read about a person."

Tara, South Central North Carolina

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Substance Over Image = Success

Be Genuine

Prospects are sophisticated enough to realize that cosmetic dentistry isn't going to turn them into Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie. Web site images of people who don't look 'real' raise suspicions that the doctor is unskilled. Consumers are very concerned to find a doctor that can address their real problems and achieve dramatic results for real people. Showing photos of run-of-the-mill people whose smiles are dramatically improved demonstrates the doctor's expertise.

Prospects also react negatively to sites that seem primarily designed to make an artistic impression. An abundance of graphics and advertising images leaves an impression that the doctor is trying to obscure a lack of talent with puffery and fluff. While it's great to show off your luxurious office, the primary focus of cosmetic dentistry sites must be on getting the prospect quickly to procedures, case studies, and before and after photos. Substance over image is key.

Web site features that make practices seem disingenuous:

- **A "glam" site** – *Overly artistic sites make consumers suspicious*
- **Advertising images** – *Make sites seem more fluff than substance*
- **Photos of models** – *Prospects want to see real people*

Be Available, Not Desperate

Consumers are also sensitive to cues that the practice is desperate for new patients, which signals that the doctor is untrustworthy. Hard-selling not only doesn't work, it sends prospects running.

For example, having a "make an appointment" or "contact us" form on every page detracts from the practice brand image. It's far more effective to feature the office phone number prominently at the top of every page. Attempting to entice consumers to fill out a contact form on every page says the doctor is desperate to gather data on prospects and cares more about profits than service. A prominent phone number, on the other hand, says the doctor is happy to be contacted without any consumer risk or commitment of personal data.

Web site features that make practices seem desperate:

- **Newsletter pop-ups** – *Annoying; prospects won't sign up*
- **Coupons** – *More likely to be perceived as negative*
- **Too many "contact us" forms** – *Limit these to 2-3 key pages*

Sites that show photos of real people and the dramatic results achieved appeal to prospective patients:

"Pop-ups are kind of like, hey, don't leave; give me your money."

Tara, South Central North Carolina

"If he has to give me a coupon to entice me, it makes me think he has to create an incentive – his reputation isn't enough to get patients."

Maria, Chicago

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Information Attracts New Patients

The focus of many cosmetic dentistry sites seems to be advertising dazzle. What actually attracts new patients, by contrast, is the quality of information provided. Web sites earn calls for appointments when they answer prospects' questions and demonstrate the doctor's commitment to patient results, care, and comfort. Fortunately, there are easy ways to not only meet but exceed consumer expectations.

Answer Patient Questions

Consumers come to cosmetic dentistry web sites with specific sets of questions and concerns. Providing answers to the following will help the web site meet the needs of the broadest spectrum of prospects.

- Does this doctor have good credentials (degrees, accolades)?
- Does this doctor keep up with the latest advances?
- What technology does this doctor use?
- Do other patients recommend this doctor?
- Will paying for this be manageable?

Once persuaded of the doctor's expertise in solving their specific problems (via procedure descriptions and photos), prospects typically check out the doctor page. Here, they're looking for confirmation that the doctor graduated from good schools, has a wealth of experience, and is up on the latest advances. While photos of the doctor and staff aren't nearly as important to cosmetic dentistry shoppers as to general dentistry and orthodontics shoppers, they're important to some prospects, so professionally-taken photos should be included.

Consumers are also likely to click on testimonials and technology links. Testimonials were effective in both written and video form, although not all prospects are willing to take the time to watch videos. Any videos included should not be set to auto-play, which can be a turn-off. Technology pages are most effective when they include details of the exact technology used and how it benefits patients.

Exceed Expectations

Prospects are surprised and delighted when sites exhibit a focus on patient care and comfort. Sites can help move the prospect from "somewhat likely" to "very likely" to make an appointment by:

- Offering same-day emergency appointments
- Listing comfort options (e.g., drinks, music/movies/TV)
- Displaying spa-like photos of the office

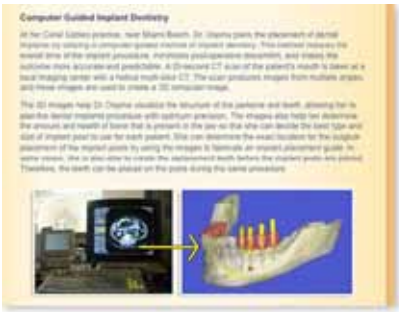
"That's nice; they have tea and juice and towels, concierge service. This site is very conducive to making an appointment."

Elliot, Chicago

"The testimonials are great because you're reading what other people had to say about the dentist."

Kim, Los Angeles

This page demonstrating how guided implant technology works impresses prospects:



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Make Sure Your Web Site Is Working for You

Having a web site is no longer just an option in helping new patients find cosmetic dentistry practices; it's a necessity. The wrong web site design, however, can turn prospects away. A great web site, on the other hand, works 24/7, persuading new patients to contact the practice for an appointment. Investing in the right web site design pays off for years to come.

Want help figuring out if your web site is earning new patients or driving them away? Sesame Communications can help you assess your web site's Patient Appeal Rating™ and guide you through ways to improve your current web site's user experience. You invest a great deal of resources in your web site; make sure it's paying you back by helping your practice to thrive and grow.

Patient Appeal Rating™

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