

Straight Talk about Internet Marketing

*By,
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We are officially an On-Line World.

The Internet – a phenomenon that has completely reshaped our daily lives in the past five years – is used by more than 225 million Americans every day. It has altered almost every human activity and interaction, including shopping, banking, dating, communicating, working, entertainment and education. Today, there are more than 65 million websites available for viewing, ranging from monster sites like www.WebMD.com to the small and obscure, like www.doggroomingbypeppie.com.

Yet, here was a conversation I had less than a week ago with a local dentist:

“Let’s talk about your website.”

“This will be fast...I don’t have one.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t believe in them.”

(Swallow) “In what sense do you say you don’t believe in them?”

“They don’t work. They are a waste of money. People do not pick dentists from the Internet.”

“That’s true. Most people do not pick dentists from the Internet; but they do research dentists on-line and a significant percentage of potential patients will refer to a practice website before their first office visit.”

“Oh.”

“Have you ever tried to do an online search for a dentist in your area to see what comes up?”

“No...(pause)...I’ve never search for anything online. In fact (embarrassed glance to the side), I don’t even think I’d know how to do it.”

“Ah ha.....well, let’s keep talking.....”

It’s not surprising that healthcare professionals who use the Internet as part of their daily lives – not just for e-mail, but for other purposes - are more likely to have a website that they view as an important part of their marketing strategy. Those who rarely use the Internet often discount its usefulness. You’re either on the bandwagon or you’re not.

But here are the facts:

- There are over 750,000 searches each month for dental-related topics on line, including searches for local dentists (20,000), cosmetic dentists (80,000), etc.

The balance is made up of searches for specific dental procedures (i.e., teeth whitening, 200,000; smile makeover, 320,000, etc.).

- Roughly 35% of potential patients will go to a practice website before their first consultation.
- According to online research, dental sites are visited for a variety of purposes: to find out more about services offered; to get directions to the office; to see “before and after” pictures; to get a better “feel” for the practice.

The “Second Generation” Site

Despite my earlier story, I find that most dentists do have websites, and many, rather outstanding ones. They are visually appealing, have excellent content, are well organized and communicate a clear message about the “personality” of the practice.

If your site does not accomplish the same thing, it might be time for look for a “makeover” of your own. The “second generation” site is very popular right now, since many businesses initially put up sites “just to have something” but may not have invested the time or expense at the time to do it right. The sophistication of website design in general has also greatly changed, which means the “homegrown look” – those sites that were developed by non-professionals like a brother-in-law, oldest son, or a generous patient – do not hold up well in comparison.

To build a site that will not only look good but have the functionality and ease of use that today’s Internet-savvy patient is expecting, you must hire a professional firm. Depending on the number of pages you have, the amount of “flash” animation you want and how much of the content you provide yourself, you can expect to pay anywhere between \$5,000 and \$10,000 + to have a customized site developed. Template sites (where a firm basically “plugs” your information into an existing template) can run anywhere from \$1,500 - \$3,000, but offer much less flexibility in terms of the look and functionality of the site. But if budget is an issue, better to go this route rather than depending on a family member who owes you a favor.

Build It and They Will Come (Not)

Once your site is built, you need to decide whether you want to compete in the popularity contest known as Search Engine Optimization (SEO). That means investing money to ensure that your site will be found quickly if someone was doing a general search for, let’s say, a cosmetic dentist in Southampton. To give you an idea of just how hard that is, if you put the term, “cosmetic dentist, Southampton, PA” into Google (the leading search engine), you get 87,000 websites. There obviously are not 87,000 cosmetic dentists in Southampton. So what are all these sites and how do you get yourself at the top of the list?

You pay, that's what, and you pay big. Most dentists do not have the deep pockets to compete with the large national companies who are willing to put out thousands of dollars each month in "pay per click" charges to get their website even in the top 20. So what other options do you have to maximize your "searchability" on the Internet?

- Consider purchasing a premium position on SuperPages.com (the online version of the Yellow Pages) which includes a link to your website.
- Build up the content of your site with educational information on a variety of topics. Content-rich sites have a much better chance of "moving up the ladder" so to speak. Keep your content updated constantly.
- Include your website address on ALL your marketing and communication materials. This will send people directly to your site and not have to depend on them to find it (or in the process, find your competitor's).
- Several organizations (LVI) and product manufacturers (Invisalign) offer marketing programs that can link you to their website for an annual fee. This can be very effective when the companies are investing in national branding programs that can drive people to their site and in turn, send them along to you.
- Become part of an online dental directory which offers geographic exclusivity (i.e., you are the only dentist listed in a certain zip code). Some are clearly better than others. Research costs and speak to other dentists about their experience before signing any long-term contracts.

A final point: The Internet is still evolving rapidly and there are new opportunities that spring up every day. (Some say that the "www" stands for "Wild, Wild West" not Worldwide Web.) Recognize and accept the omnipotence of the Internet in the consumer's decision-making and information gathering process. And if you are not Internet-savvy, find an outside professional who can keep you current and be able to position you and your website for success.

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