

Marketing Your Practice in a Social World

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Marketing Your Practice in a Social World

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Social media use has moved beyond just being a way for family and friends to keep in touch. Now it is imperative that all businesses implement a social media strategy into their overall marketing plan. Medical practices are no exception. Using social media within your medical practice will allow you take your marketing to a new level of success. It also allows you to connect with patients on a more personal, less corporate level.

KEY WORDS: Social media; Internet marketing; Facebook; reputation management; blogging; video.

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The days when social media were used simply to share photos and connect with old high school friends are over. In just a few years, social media has become a marketing phenomenon, and if you are not using social media, you should be. Every industry in the world is trying to figure out how to implement a social media plan and make it work, and the healthcare industry is no exception. But before you jump on the social media bandwagon, you need to plan and ask yourself several questions in order to launch a successful campaign.

While it's free to create social media profiles, such as Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube, creating profiles and letting them stand isn't enough. Ask yourself: What are you trying to accomplish? What will your voice be? Who will invest their time in maintaining your social networking strategy? In order to succeed, you need to answer these questions before getting started.

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH?

Before you create social media accounts, know your goals. If you don't know how to define your success, how do you expect to attain and measure it? There are several things you can do as a medical marketing professional to construct your social media success:

- Build traffic to your website;
- Create a buzz about your practice;
- Build relationships with current and potential patients;
- Gain reviews from patients, which will increase trust in potential patients; and
- Get more visitors, which will generate more potential patient leads.

Once you decide what you are trying to accomplish, decide how you want to measure your success. Is it comments

on your Facebook page? Is it traffic from your social media profile to your Web site? Determine how you want to look at the numbers each month and measure it. You can use tools like Google Analytics or Google Alerts to measure your exposure and increased visits.

WHAT WILL YOUR VOICE BE?

Be memorable. No one wants to follow social media pages that brag about their own practice but give the consumer nothing. Write about things your patients want. Give them information, a contest, or even humor. Give them a reason to come back, and don't shamelessly self-promote. Follow the rule of giving your followers nine things, such as helpful tips and information, and giving yourself one self-promotion. It is especially hard with medical practices to find a voice that is both professional and entertaining. What tips can you give your patients? What would *you* want to read about?

WHO WILL INVEST THEIR TIME?

This is one of the most commonly asked questions we hear. It's important to note that once you get in the habit of managing your social networking, it takes very little time.

Don't just connect your social media accounts to a blog feed and consider that successful. Someone needs to spend time regularly posting on your accounts to engage and communicate with your audience. Also, don't assume an outsider with a lot of time on his or her hands can do a better job than your own practice can. You are the expert of your practice, and that makes you the best voice. You may not think you have the time, but you do. Make time to offer up some quick health tips or answer common questions you hear in your practice before you have your morning coffee. It's that simple.

Once you have created a general social media plan, you need to decide where you want to create your social media presence. There are hundreds of free services out there, so where should you start? We will take a look at the most popular social media avenues: Facebook, blogging, and patient reviews. While Twitter is one of the most popular social media sites, our research has shown that it is not the most effective social media marketing platform for medical practices. Better results can be gained from other social media avenues.

USING FACEBOOK FOR YOUR MEDICAL PRACTICE

Facebook has become the social media platform of choice for businesses, including medical practices. While there are countless social media sites on the Web, Facebook has moved to the forefront of tools for online marketing. If you're not using Facebook for your practice, here are five reasons why you should:

1. **It's free marketing.** Marketing your practice is typically expensive. The advent of social media allows you access to marketing that won't break your budget. Although having a Web site used to be enough, more and more people now are searching Facebook for supplementary information, and they are checking these pages during their decision-making process. If you don't have a Web site and a Facebook page, you live in the shadow of your competitors.
2. **Facebook helps you build relationships and communicate with your patients.** While it is critical to adhere to the laws surrounding medical practices and patient privacy, you still can use Facebook as a way to build relationships with your patients. Facebook allows you to connect with your patients on a personal, less corporate level. Social media offers instant communication, so you can easily share practice updates and events.
3. **You need to monitor your online reputation.** As a doctor, you go to great lengths to establish and protect your reputation, but do you really know what people are saying about you online? Using Facebook can help monitor what your patients are saying about you and your practice. Also, because communication is instantaneous, it allows you to address any complaints, concerns, and questions from patients quickly. The key is to stay in tune with what is being said and deal with each issue as it arises. As an administrator on your practice's business page, you have the ability to moderate comments.
4. **It can help your Web site's search engine ranking.** Using Facebook to share your blog posts, Web site content, pictures, etc., with links back to your Web site, helps with your search engine results. Facebook posts are already being indexed and integrated into your search results on the Web.
5. **Your competitors are on Facebook.** Your competitors most likely have Facebook pages, so it is important that you have one too. This is one of the best ways to see what your competitors are doing and stay abreast of changes in your market.

BLOGGING: AN EASY WAY TO ADD FRESH CONTENT

Every practice should have a Web site, but every Web site should also have a blog. Blogs are the best place on a Web site for your patients to get to know you. Let your practice's personality shine, and try to blog at least once a week.

Blogging is important because it integrates with every other part of your social media plan and can help with your branding and search engine optimization efforts. Some ways to use your blog are:

- Every time you blog, post a short description and a link on Facebook and Twitter.
- When you post a new video to YouTube, embed it in a blog post and talk about what shooting was like.
- When patients leave a testimonial or a review for you on another Web site, thank them on your blog and share the link to the review or a snippet of the testimonial.

Don't let blogging intimidate you. Remember, you are the expert, and your patients want to know what you think. Here are some ideas to help you write:

- Is there a new technique, instrument, or procedure being covered by the media? Write your thoughts about it.
- Are you introducing a new procedure at the office or a new staff member? Let people know!
- Did a patient ask you an unusual question? Answer this question in the blog.
- Are there questions you get asked by every patient? Write up a series of FAQ posts.
- Do you have continuing education courses or a conference coming up? Let people know that you stay up-to-date.
- What made you become a doctor? Write about it.
- What is it like working in a medical office? Ask a staff member to do a "guest post" about life at the office.

For success with the search engines (and your visitors), make sure each of your blog entries has the following:

- Always write unique content. Make sure you don't copy and paste content from other Web sites. If there is something on another site you would like to reference, link to it and write your thoughts.
- Always give your blog a keyword-rich title, and link back to your Web site when appropriate. For example, if you write a blog about cataract surgery, link the words "cataract surgery" back to that page on your Web site.
- At the end of the entry, create a call to action, and encourage readers to contact you.

- Add pictures, if they are relevant to the entry. Readers love visuals.
- Always spell check and break your content up in to short paragraphs that are easy to read.

THE VALUE OF ONLINE PATIENT REVIEWS AND RATINGS

We all know that word-of-mouth advertising is one of the most effective and important forms of marketing, and online reviews are no different. So why does the mere mention of “reviews” make business owners cringe? Online review forums are places for customers to vent about bad experiences or poor customer service, but more importantly, they are a place for your patients to sing your praises and share their positive experiences. Many people focus on the question, “What if I get a bad review?” Everyone knows negative reviews will hurt your reputation and your brand, and can even cause your business to lose potential customers, but it is important not to lose sight of the power of positive reviews as an effective counter-measure.

How Do You Acquire Positive Reviews?

You have to be diligent in seeking out positive reviews. Identify patients and clients you know will leave you a positive review, and kindly request they take a few minutes to write about their experience. When they do, thank them and encourage them to post similar feedback on other review sites where you have a profile. Google Places isn’t the only important review site; other popular places for reviews include Yahoo Local, Bing, Yelp, Healthgrades, CitySearch, InsiderPages.

Don’t wait for a bad review to show up about your practice before soliciting positive reviews.

Other strategies include:

- Provide links to your online review listings in follow-up e-mails, newsletters, and even e-mail signatures. Happy patients are willing to leave reviews, but don’t want to search the Web for your business listing. Remove the “searching” step, and you will get more reviews.

- Use a service such as RatePoint, Demand Force, or Review Push. These services feature mass e-mail options, will let you post reviews directly to your Web site, and will help you fight negative reviews.
- Some of the services listed above will allow your patients to leave reviews when they are in your office, without the sites filtering reviews from the same IP address. Hand patients an iPad in the waiting room with your review sites open, and have them do it right there.

Be proactive, not reactive. Don’t wait for a bad review to show up about your practice before soliciting positive reviews. Recent studies^{1,2} have concluded that more than three-quarters of people read online reviews before making a purchasing decision. This goes for shoes, restaurants, dentistry, plastic surgery, and physicians. Other studies have been done that show that online reviews have a 70% trust level, which is second only to recommendations from friends and family.¹ So get out there, and get some reviews. Because having zero online reviews can be just as detrimental to a business as a negative review.

HOW WILL YOU IMPLEMENT SOCIAL MEDIA INTO YOUR PRACTICE?

So now you know how to create a social media campaign, where to start, and how to use this foundation to supplement your online presence with review sites and blogging. So why should you do it? Your medical marketing efforts should be about promoting your practice, educating patients, gaining potential leads, increasing traffic, and showing patients why they should choose you. Social media is an online arena that can get your message out in a matter of seconds. If you do it right, and build your brand through a comprehensive online marketing strategy, you can get one message out a week to potentially thousands of people. So . . . why wouldn’t you? ■■

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