

Word-of-mouth 2.0

How leveraging one's online reputation can help attract new patients

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It is an undisputed fact that in the world of dentistry, no amount of expensive advertising or fancy marketing can beat the power of word-of-mouth referrals from your satisfied patients. What your patients say about you is the ultimate driver of your business success. Today, consumers increasingly turn to the Internet to locate and select a dental practice. Understanding this and using the right tools will help you create and maintain the most relevant, valuable practice builder you'll ever have: the experience and feedback of your own patients shared with millions of prospective patients actively seeking a new dental practice. It's up to you to choose: will your online reputation consist of a single thread of random gossip, or will it become your most valued asset, carefully managed and nurtured to give you the best return on your investment?

Everyone knows consumers will share a good experience with a few people, but they'll make a point of telling the world about a negative one. As a service provider, you and your staff are your brand. You don't sell widgets; you sell your skills, experience, specialties, personalities, hours and location—and your very existence and livelihood depend on your reputation.

We all work hard to ensure our patients have a good experience and ask that refer us to friends and family based on this. Now, take that most valuable scenario, expand it to hundreds and even thousands of prospective patients, and you've just moved from the world of offline word-of-mouth referrals to the sophisticated new world of online reputation-based marketing—or word-of-mouth 2.0.

We know that in the growing world of online reviews, consumers want and expect to find the local user information they seek, whether it's a great Italian restaurant or a top-notch cosmetic dental practice. As the Internet has come of age, our universe of availability for goods and services has exploded. The advent of local reviews provides a return to neighbourhood intimacy—and neighbourhood reputation.

It is highly likely you already have an online reputation, and may not even know it. Through online web sites, consumers can review and rate your business. There is no way to know whether their comments are legitimate. In fact, these people may have never seen your dental chair. Like it or not, these consumers are establishing your online reputation—without your knowledge, without your control—and there has been nothing you could do to manage this exposure, until now.

Driving patient volumes

As you probably know, the largest and most powerful search engine is Google. Today, 67 per cent of all online searches are conducted using Google. Google sees 3.2 billion visits per month. You can optimise your web site to come up in the free, natural search results when prospective patients google for a dental practice. If you choose to pay for exposure, you can subscribe to Google Adwords (<https://adwords.google.com/select/Login>), paying for each 'click' generated from Google to your web site. The higher you bid for a click, the higher your placement in the sponsored section of Google.

There are many dental practices that bid more than US\$6 for every click, resulting in thousands of pounds spent on Adwords each month. One particular practice I am aware of spends more than US\$3,000 a month on Adwords and claims the cost is "worth every penny". As with all advertising, there are limitations, even beyond expense. Ads are companies promoting themselves, and today's savvy consumer recognises this and filters information accordingly. However, even the world's leading search engine recognises the extreme power and relevance of word-of-mouth feedback. Google recently expanded its offerings to enable consumers to search for and compare local businesses online. Try searching for a dentist in your area by typing in your postcode followed by the word dentist in the Google search box. A map with a listing of ten dental practices will be displayed above the natural search results.

To the far right of each listing is a link to reviews. This is where a consumer can view what your patients say about your practice. With this Google has hit the referral jackpot: this functionality leverages consumer relationships and capitalises on the inherent credibility of the first-person testimonial. This is a priceless intangible—something advertising dollars just can't buy.

Build your reputation

So how do you, as a dentist, take advantage of this new tool to guide and shape your online reputation? It is important to remember that this is not a practice snapshot in time, but rather a reputation built and sustained over time. Your best chance of securing and maintaining a 'top-ten' placement is to be amongst the first to populate your Google profile—and to keep a steady stream of relevant reviews and quality practice information flowing in to Google. You can do this one of two ways: passively or actively.

The passive approach: you can hope the patients who visit your practice have the wherewithal to create a Google account, find your Google profile, and submit a review. This requires time and effort on your patients' part, and staff time to inform patients and promote the process. Even if your staff are dedicated to making your patients aware of the online review process, you can only hope patients remember to follow through once they get back to their busy schedules at home and work. If history is any guide, a passive approach will result in one or two reviews posted over the course of several months.

The proactive approach: today, the only integrated approach to proactively managing your online reputation on Google is through companies such as Demandforce (<http://demandforce.com/>), an online

patient-communication company. They recently announced a data integration agreement with Google that enables dental practices to populate their Google profiles easily, including posting reviews directly from data originating from their communication systems.

With Demandforce, each patient is automatically sent a thank-you e-mail message after each appointment. As part of the thank-you, they can choose to submit a confidential survey of their visit, as well as a public review. You can read the reviews of your practice and post a response or ask for a review to be removed if it does not meet standard posting requirements. After seven days, the data is automatically sent to Google to populate your profile.

This proactive approach results in dozens of reviews being posted to your profile every month. In addition to Google review management, Demandforce will optimise your profile by submitting additional information such as specialties, languages spoken, insurance accepted, hours of operation and affiliations. You can also choose to integrate online scheduling directly into your profile. The new Google review functionality is included at no additional cost with a standard monthly subscription.

Whether you opt to take a passive approach or a proactive approach to building your online reputation, I highly recommend you take charge to ensure it accurately reflects and therefore benefits your practice. Your online reputation is your business and those practices that realise this early on will have a significant head start over their peers.

Solicited or not, online reviews are here to stay. Our patients' satisfaction and their resulting word-of-mouth referrals will always be our bread and butter; only the serving plate has changed. What are you doing to shape your online reputation? Have you googled your practice or your competitors lately?

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