

Dermatology Patients Ask Google. But Who Answers?



Despite dermatologists' expertise, their sites may not rank highest in search for skin health topics.

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>> There is no shortage of information, advice, and statistics about SEO (search engine optimization) and digital marketing, but rarely is it tailored to dermatology practices. Even more concerning, there is little to no data about the quality of information that is easily accessible to the general public. Here we will examine the results of a small but enlightening study that sheds light on both aspects of this topic.

A UNIQUE STUDY IN DERMATOLOGY INFORMATION

Considering the growing prevalence of internet self-diagnosis via “Dr. Google,” the information returned via internet search may have an impact on public health. Jennifer L. Sawaya, MD, of Massachusetts General Hospital, along with several colleagues, conducted an interesting study that was designed to assess the quality of this information, specifically in relation to dermatological and aesthetic treatments.

Researchers chose 10 of the most common dermatology related search terms, as determined by data from top Instagram hashtags cross-referenced with keyword analytics. These terms—liposuction, cosmetic surgery, skin rejuvenation, skin tightening, tattoo removal, laser hair removal, body contouring, CoolSculpting, fillers, and Botox—were then put through Google

advance search, and the top 25 results for each term recorded.

To minimize the influence of Google customization, researchers cleared the cookies, cache, and history on devices immediately prior to conducting the searches. They acknowledged that Google results vary depending on the type of device, as well as the date the search is conducted. However, their findings are likely reflective of overall trends, and they lend some insight into the effects of recent Google algorithm updates.

What type of results occupied the top 25 results most frequently? If you expect dermatologist-owned websites or peer-reviewed journals to top the list of most common search results, you are in for a surprise.

- Clinical practices comprised less than a quarter (23 percent) of overall top results. Only two keywords—cosmetic surgery and CoolSculpting—had more results from clinical practices than from other sources. For body contouring, the most popular type of result was a tie between clinical practices and professional societies.
- Medical spas accounted for just 16 percent of total results evaluated. However, they outranked other result categories for the keywords “skin rejuvenation” and “tattoo removal.”
- Of all clinical practice and medical

spa results, fewer than half were from plastic surgeons and less than a quarter were from board-certified dermatologists.

- Three very reliable types of information sources—academic centers, professional societies, and peer-reviewed journals—each appeared in fewer than 10 percent of results. None of these categories ranked most common for any keyword, with the exception of body contouring, as mentioned above.
- More than one third of all results came from either news media or health information websites. Furthermore, one of these categories was the most common result type for half of the keywords evaluated.

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US ABOUT DERMATOLOGY SEO?

From its early days, Google has consistently reiterated that their goal is to return high quality search results. However, that sentiment is probably the only thing about Google's algorithm that has remained constant through the years. Their definition of quality and methods of verifying it have steadily evolved with some sudden and dramatic changes along the way. For dermatologists and other medical professionals, the most jarring update in recent history was the so-called “medic

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update” released mid-2018.

As usual, the goal of the medic update was improving the quality of results. It increased the importance of E-A-T, which refers to Expertise, Authority, and Trustworthiness. With information sites that are not owned by medical professionals dominating many results and professional societies and journals rarely appearing, the success of Google’s efforts might be questionable.

However, the effect is seen in what’s not included in the study results. Personal websites and blogs did not appear often enough to earn mention.

We can see that Google is successfully favoring reputable organizations, such as medical practices and established information sites. Why would board-certified dermatologists not top the list of expert, authoritative, trustworthy information sources? There are several reasons:

- **Links.** At the time of this writing, WebMD had more than 90 million inbound links according to ahrefs.com. Even a super popular private practice is only likely to accumulate a tiny fraction of that number. You might not be able to compete in quantity of links, which is why you need to work harder to ensure you are acquiring quality links.
- **Citations.** None of the studied search terms included wording like “near me” or “provider.” Google likely interpreted them as informational searches. When the algorithm detects that the user is seeking a physical business, it typically eliminates online-only results like WebMD. Therefore, you have an advantage in local search. To make the most of it, you need quality local citations, which include business listings, media mentions, and other references to your practice. Citations lend credibility to your practice as a local business.
- **Type of information.** Google is getting much better at detecting the context of keywords within content, as well as matching the searcher intent. Many professional websites have a list of services with little or no information, and some have purely promotional content. These sites are unlikely to rank when Google detects an information-seeking query. Furthermore, Google’s own guidelines describe information that conflicts with the general “expert consensus” as misleading. Therefore, a

large percentage of alternative medicine and other non-traditional medical sites have lost ranking in the past couple of years.

- **Proof of E-A-T.** Media websites clearly list the author of an article, usually along with a bio showing that person is a health reporter or otherwise qualified to write on the topic. Similarly, information sites usually list a doctor who wrote or reviewed the content. If multiple people in your office write for your blog, include authorship information for every article. If all content on your website is produced by your practice, be sure the website clearly highlights your medical credentials.

GIVE GOOGLE WHAT IT WANTS

Websites belonging to board-certified dermatologists occupy a surprisingly small number of top results in Google searches for dermatology related information. However, you can navigate your way to one of those coveted spots by giving Google exactly what it is looking for: in-depth, accurate information with abundant proof of expertise, authority, and trustworthiness. ■

Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dermatologists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you’re looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy session with Naren.

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