

Why Internet Marketing Matters to Today's Eye Care Professional

The top three search results on Google receive more than 60% of all search traffic.

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Before the advent of the Internet, patients relied heavily on traditional means such as suggestions from friends, family, and coworkers to find a suitable eye care provider. Some would seek referrals from their family physician, while others would use the Yellow Pages and try to gauge which of the ads appeared more impressive than the others. Still other patients would simply choose an ophthalmologist from their health plan who happened to be in close vicinity and hope for the best.

Today, the immense popularity of the Internet and the power of search engines like Google have completely transformed the way patients obtain information about ophthalmologists. Information that was once scarcely available is now freely obtainable by anyone with the press of a button. Ophthalmologists and optometrists with respected, established practices can no longer rest on their laurels and expect a steady flow of patients. The Internet has created a level playing field for all and the democratization of information.

SEARCHING FOR OPHTHALMOLOGISTS ONLINE

Pew Internet, part of the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit "fact tank" that provides information on the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping America and the world, tracks overall trends in how the Internet is changing people's approaches to health care. In March 2011, an extensive study conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project¹ and the California Healthcare Foundation found that



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more than 80% of Internet users in the United States search online for health-related information. One of the most interesting findings of the study was that 44% of Internet users are actually looking for doctors and other health care providers when they search for health information online.

If the results of this survey are any indication, search engine optimization and online marketing are clear game-changers for private medical professionals in an increasingly Internet-centric world. Traditional means of obtaining information like the Yellow Pages are almost a relic of the past. With free and easy access to health information, patients are aware of what they are looking for when they go to see a doctor, and they are no longer satisfied with word-of-mouth recommendations alone. They prefer to check the provider's online reputation, other patients' ratings and reviews, and even compare two or more doctors before they choose the best one for their needs.

NEW PATIENTS ARE LOOKING FOR YOU

If you are an independent eye care provider, chances are that scores of potential new patients are searching for you online every day. If they already know your name or have been referred to you, they are likely to

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perform a specific online search for you before they decide to visit your practice. If patients do not know you, they may still be searching for you by your specialty and the area where your practice is located.

If these potential patients do not find you among the top three results of their online search, they will find someone else in your area who is offering similar services. According to a recent study by Optify,² the top three search results on Google receive more than 60% of all search traffic. To succeed in the Internet age, you must be aware of this reality. If you are not highly visible online, you may lose a large number of Internet-savvy patients to a competitor who has an outstanding online presence. Your online reputation is built primarily around your website, professional listings, ratings, profiles, patient reviews, and social media networking.

EXISTING PATIENTS ARE WATCHING YOU

The reach and power of the Internet is giving rise to another important phenomenon to eye care providers. Your existing patients may be following you online, comparing your performance and online reputation with other specialists in your geographic area. Harvard psychiatrists Tristan Gorrindo and James E. Groves suggest that patients want to know more about their doctor. "Many physicians over a certain age never envision their patients web searching for personal information about their doctor," they say. Older practitioners (mistakenly) believe that "being absent from the web is the surest way of avoiding disclosure of personal information on the web."³

Because patients are increasingly interested in knowing as much as they can about their eye care providers, it makes sense for you to be the one to satisfy their sense of curiosity and provide them with authentic information by way of a comprehensive website, online patient testimonials, reviews and ratings, YouTube videos, and social networking on Facebook and Twitter. An Internet-friendly and communicative approach can help build more engaging and long-term patient-doctor relationships.

THE POWER OF INTERNET SEARCHES

Word of mouth and referrals continue to remain the strongest form of publicity for physicians. Many ophthalmologists and optometrists fail to recognize that in today's changing social information paradigm, word of mouth must be reinforced by authoritative and detailed information on the web.

Scenario No. 1. The Patient is Referred by Another Eye Care Provider

Other care provider referrals continue to be one of the most common ways that patients find a new doctor. More often than not, patients will search your name or the name of your practice to learn more about you before he or she decides to schedule an appointment. Your online visibility, website quality, patient testimonials, and general online reputation are likely to influence his or her decision to schedule an appointment.

Scenario No. 2. The Patient Is Referred by Family or Friends

Patients may receive a personal referral about you from their family members, friends, or coworkers. Sometimes, the referral may not be specific, but a past patient may mention your name in a casual conversation or make a positive recommendation. There is a good possibility that the patient will try to locate your website to evaluate how you rank on the "three As" that most patients are looking for: ability, approachability, and affordability.

Scenario No. 3. The Patient Checks the Health Insurance Website

If the patient is in sudden need of a new eye care specialist to receive treatment for a symptom or an injury, he or she may decide to locate an eligible provider through his or her insurance carrier's website. This may result in a short-list of names in the desired geographic area, which also includes your name. The most logical way the patient will choose one from the list is by comparing each provider's web presence and online reputation.

Scenario No. 4. Random Search Engine Check

The quickest and the most common way a patient is likely to find a new eye care specialist is by simply typing in a keyword on a prominent search engine, such as Google, that includes your specialty and geographic area. The potential patient usually picks the top two or three names from the search results, compares their websites and online reputation, and then makes

an appointment with the provider who impresses them the most. Rarely do searchers look beyond page one of search results.

Scenario No. 5. Social Media Search

There is a growing interest among patients to locate eye care specialists on leading social media websites such as Facebook or Twitter. If the patient notices that one of their Facebook friends has posted a positive message on the Facebook page of specialist, he or she may try to check out what the practice is all about. If the patient becomes a fan or friend of the eye care provider's page, a greater engagement forms, culminating in the patient making an appointment.

AFFORDABLE, PRACTICAL, EFFECTIVE

The Internet does not suffer from the typical constraints of time and space that plague traditional media and promotional tools. That makes it a perfect medium for eye care providers who need to explain their credentials, facilities, services, and procedures in detail to help patients understand how they can fulfil their needs most effectively. Internet marketing is highly affordable, practical, and effective, because it can be targeted specifically to the geographic area where the ophthalmologist or optometrist's practice is established.

In the Internet marketing race, the ultimate triumph comes from reaching the top three search results on Google and other major search engines. To the eye care providers who realize the value of Internet marketing before their competitors will go the victory. ■

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