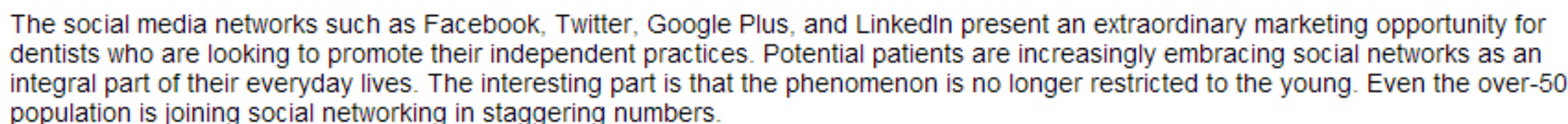


By Susan M. Hutson, with Vikas Vij



Dental practitioners cannot afford to ignore the fact that Facebook alone has more than one billion active users worldwide. A.C. Nielsen reports that more than 80% of all American adults use an online social network. Facebook gets the lion's share, with Americans spending more time on Facebook than on any other website.

Almost 23% of the time an average user spends online is on social networking. These numbers are compelling a growing number of small businesses and professionals, including dentists, to consider leveraging the immense power of social media to their marketing advantage.

Independent dental practitioners have a clear advantage, like most other small businesses, in shifting their marketing strategies toward social media. Zoomerang, a leading online survey firm, conducted a study of 1,180 small and medium businesses (SMBs) and 500 customers to understand what is driving SMBs and independently practicing professionals to leverage the marketing power of social media. It revealed three key reasons:

- High visibility to a large number of people
- Personalized connectivity with potential clients
- Personal image enhancement and self-promotion

Dentists who have not yet woken up to the power of social media must realize that it is not just a tool for building relationships, but it is also a good tool for their business.

Crowdspring, a leading crowd sourcing marketplace, reveals these findings:

- More than half of all SMBs and professionals report gaining new clients through social networks, most notably through Facebook.
- 64% of Twitter users and 51% of Facebook users are more likely to purchase the products or services from the businesses they follow on social media.
- Results can be achieved without spending much on social media. About 60% of small businesses spend less than \$100, and 74% do not have an employee to run their social media marketing campaigns.

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A great dentistry website deserves to have a high-targeted visibility in organic search. Leading search engines such as Google are increasingly attaching importance to websites that are integrated with active social networking. Search engines are using social media activities as one of the most reliable forms of evidence to determine the worthiness of a website from the point of view of online readers.

For instance, when someone shares useful content from your dentistry website on Facebook or Twitter, it's a cue to help a search engine determine the value and relevancy of your website. Every link or mention of your website on social networks is viewed by search engines as a vote or an endorsement of your content by the general readers on the Internet. So your page rankings improve as more people "vote" for your website on social networks.

Dentists can enhance their social media networking by providing unique, relevant, and highly useful nuggets of information to their readers regularly. Interesting blog posts, compelling news items, patient testimonials, and even case studies, ebooks, and useful weblinks, as well as interesting and educational images and videos can be posted on a dentist's social media account to achieve higher "votes" from the readers.

Online reputation management

On one hand, active social media networking can help a dental practice dominate the search engine page results (SERPs). And on the other hand, it can help a dentist maintain a good online reputation. The Internet is essentially a free medium that makes it extremely difficult to control or manage an individual's online image or reputation.

For instance, third party reviewers on the Internet can make or break a professional's reputation, and there is not much the professional can do about it. However, with a greater degree of personalized control over social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, LinkedIn, and Flickr, it becomes possible for a professional such as a dentist to manage his or her online reputation in a far better way.

Importance of user generated content

Perhaps the best endorsement for a dentist comes from patients. No amount of paid advertising and marketing can match the impact that a positive testimonial can have on a new patient. This is what user-generated content on social networks is all about — from a dentist's perspective.

eMarketer, a premier Internet research and analysis firm, says that 65% of all Internet users between the ages of 18 and 24 consult the information, comments, and opinions available over the social networks before making a buying decision for any products or services. If a dentist invests enough time and effort to build a great social media presence, the results can be astounding.

Wider reach to your target audience

Social networks offer dentists the potential to reach out to the widest possible number of new patients at the lowest marketing cost per patient. Compared to any other form of advertising and marketing, social networking is the one that requires the least amount of time, effort, and money, and has the potential to achieve the highest results.

The incredible power of social networking stems from the fact that each of your followers and fans has his or her own followers and fans. In other words, if just one of your followers on Twitter shares one interesting tweet on dentistry that you posted online, it will automatically reach 100 followers, assuming an average active Twitter user has 100 followers. Out of those 100 followers, if one other follower retweets your tweet, you can expect your reach to grow exponentially.

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Gaining professional clout

Perhaps one of the most understated benefits of social media networking for dental practitioners is the enhancement of their professional clout. Apart from reaching out to potential patients in the area where the practice is located, the dentist can also improve connectivity with other professionals in the industry.

These could include leading dentists from any part of the world, potential business partners, media professionals, marketing and PR experts, thought leaders in dentistry, dentistry conference and event organizers, and other industry influencers.

Active social media networking can lead a dentist to new connections that could help promote his or her practice. It could lead to speaking opportunities, conference invitations, finding sponsors for community events, and above all, learning about the latest developments in the field of dentistry around the world.

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Partnering with experts

To boost the business prospects of their practices through social media marketing, dentists can partner with professional social networking experts or companies with experience in social media promotions. Internet marketing firms with an exclusive focus on promoting medical practices may be the best partners for dentists to create and manage highly successful social networking campaigns.

About the author: Susan Hutson is vice president of marketing at Ekwa.com, a complete Internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media marketing, and the online reputations of dentists. Vikas Vij is the marketing manager-SEO for Ekwa Marketing. Visit the website at www.ekwa.com.