

Why Internet Marketing Matters to Today's Dermatologist

Word of mouth and referrals continue to remain the strongest form of publicity for a doctor, but the Internet increasingly plays a role in facilitating or supporting recommendations.

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Until the advent of Internet technology, patients relied heavily on traditional means, such as suggestions from friends, family, and co-workers, to find a suitable doctor. Some would seek referrals from their family physician, while some others would use the Yellow Pages and try to guess which of the ads appeared more impressive than the others. Some patients would simply choose a doctor from their health plan who happened to be in close vicinity—and hope for the best.

The immense popularity of the Internet and the power of search engines such as Google have completely transformed the way patients obtain information about doctors in the 21st century. Information that used to be scarcely available at one time is now freely available to anyone at the press of a button. Doctors with old and established practices can no longer rest on the laurels of their past and expect a streaming flow of patients. The Internet has created a level playing field for all and created democratization of information.

SEARCHING FOR DOCTORS ONLINE

Pew Internet is a leading company that tracks overall trends in how the Internet is changing people's approach 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 more than 80 percent of Internet users in the US search online for health-related information. One of the most interesting findings of the study was that 44 percent of Internet users are actually looking for doctors and other healthcare providers when they search for health information online.

If the results of this survey are any indication, search engine optimization and online marketing are clearly game-changers for private medical professionals in an increasingly Internet-

centric world. Traditional means of information such as Yellow Pages are almost a relic of the past. With free and easy access to health information, patients are highly aware of what they are looking for when they go to see a doctor. Patients are no longer satisfied with word of mouth recommendations alone. They actually like to check the doctor's online reputation, ratings and views of other patients, and even compare between two or more doctors before they choose the best one for their needs.

NEW PATIENTS ARE LOOKING FOR YOU

If you are an independent medical practitioner, 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 by someone, they are likely to make a specific online search for you before they actually decide to visit you. If they do not know you, they may still be searching for you by your specialty and the name of the city or area where you run your practice.

If 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 as you. According to a recent study by Optify², the top three search results on Google receive over 60 percent of all search traffic. You must be acutely aware of this reality if you are going to succeed in the Internet age. If you are not highly visible online, you stand to lose a large number of Internet-savvy patients to a competitor who has an outstanding online presence. This online presence and reputation is built primarily around your website, professional listings, ratings, profiles, patient reviews, and social media networking.

EXISTING PATIENTS ARE WATCHING YOU

The incredible reach and power of the Internet is giving rise to another interesting phenomenon that you need to be aware

of as a doctor. Even your existing patients may be following you on the Internet, and quietly comparing your performance and online reputation against other doctors in your geographic area. Harvard psychiatrists Tristan Gorrindo and James E. Groves³ 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. The older doctors (mistakenly) believe that "being absent from the web is the surest way of avoiding disclosure of personal information on the web."

In the era of free information, patients are increasingly interested in knowing as much as they can about their doctor. Therefore, it makes great sense to satiate their sense of curiosity and provide them with authentic information straight from the horse's mouth 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 THE INTERNET SEARCH

Word of mouth and referrals continue to remain the strongest form of publicity for a doctor. However, many doctors fail to recognize that in the changing social information paradigm, word of mouth usually needs to be backed up by authoritative and detailed information on the web.

Scenario 1: The Patient Is Referred by Another Doctor.

Doctor referrals continue to be one of the most common ways that patients find a new doctor. However, more often than not, the patient will search your name or the name of your practice to know more about you before he or she decides to schedule an appointment with you. Your online visibility, website quality, patient testimonials, and general online reputation are likely to influence the patient's decision to schedule an appointment.

Scenario 2: The Patient Is Referred by Family or Friends.

Patients may receive a personal referral about you from their family members, friends, or co-workers. Sometimes the referral may not be specific, but a past patient may mention your name in a casual conversation or make a positive recommendation about you. There is a high degree of 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 3: Patient Checks the Health Insurance Website.

If the patient is in sudden need of a new doctor to get treatment for a symptom or an injury, he or she may decide to locate an eligible doctor through the insurance provider's website. This may result in a short list of names in the desired

geographic area, which also includes your name. Now the most logical way the patient will choose one from the list is by comparing each doctor's web presence and online reputation.

Scenario 4: Random Search Engine Check. The quickest and the most common way a patient is likely to find a new doctor 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 doctor who impresses them the most. Rarely do searchers look beyond page one of search results.

Scenario 5: Social Media Search. There is a growing interest among patients to locate doctors on leading social media websites, such as Facebook or Twitter, as well. If the patient notices that one of their Facebook friends has posted a positive message on the Facebook page of a doctor, he or she may try to check out what the medical practice is all about. If the patient becomes a fan or friend of the doctor's page, a greater engagement forms, culminating in the patient making an appointment with the doctor.

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 doctors 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 doctor'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. And to the doctors, who realize the value of Internet marketing before their competitors, will go the victory.

Next month in Marketing Matters, Susan and team Ekwa tell you how to "Set up your website and get in the game!" ■

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1. <http://pewinternet.org/Trend-Data.aspx>

2. <http://www.optify.net/guides/organic-click-through-rate-curve>

3. <http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/300/2/213>