

SOCIAL MEDIA CAN MAKE YOUR PRACTICE SHINE



BY KRISTIE NATION

We all know that social media is an important tool for any dental practice. But many practices never go past the rudimentary steps of setting up and managing a Facebook page. A bump up in traffic from well thought out interactions with patients and the surrounding community is nice, but the real power of social networking remains untapped.

This does not mean there's anything wrong with day-to-day Facebook interaction. In fact, this steady, consistent activity creates a solid foundation on which to build. Every positive interaction can be used to create more opportunities, and every new form of outreach can result in long-lasting benefits that help a practice thrive. Think of social media as creating a roadmap to your practice's door.

In addition to the day-to-day activity that builds the foundation, your practice should be ready for periodic big pushes that increase visibility in a big way to help you achieve bigger, better goals than you imagined possible. These include doubling new patients by the end of the year, or increasing Facebook reach by 100%.

If you've been working hard on social networking, then you've created a framework to support this kind of big push. (If not, get started now. You'll need a proper foundation when the time comes to raise money for charity or boost third-quarter appointments.)

Let's look at what can happen when a dental practice goes a step further with social media and places billboards instead of just creating a roadmap. Of course, not every plan will result in a viral, organic explosion of attention from social media. But it might. Sometimes the biggest reactions come from the most spontaneous actions.

CASE IN POINT:

In Ocean Springs, Miss., Dr. Edward Banas decided to take a personal stand against bullying when he heard that a classmate attacked a local special-needs teen at school. The boy was punched and knocked to the ground, bloodying his hands and face and breaking a front tooth. Dr. Banas and his team found out about the boy's injuries and offered to fix his smile free of charge.

The practice did not do it as a marketing ploy. The practice simply stepped up and helped a family in need. As an afterthought, a picture of a smiling Austin was posted on the practice's Facebook Page with the message, "For the bully who tried to mess up Austin with a fist, we are laughing at you ... Austin is the hero!"

The response to this anti-bullying message was amazing. Barely a week later, the post had more than 5,500 likes, more than 175 comments, and 130 shares. This generated thousands more likes and even more comments and sharing! One simple act of kindness and a message of hope kick-started an amazing amount of positive interaction within the community.

The visibility also created a storm of interest in Dr. Banas' practice. People posted comments such as, "I think I just found a new dentist!" and "We'll look you up if we move from New Jersey!" One comment even came from parents of two special needs children in Hawaii, stating in part, "... if we know people moving out your way, we will DEFINITELY recommend your office!"

You cannot buy this kind of word-of-mouth marketing. It is just not possible. The fact that Dr. Banas and his team are a socially aware practice is what made the post such a positive force. Without a Facebook page, there would have been no viral story.

Using social media in this fashion produces real, measurable results. Obviously you cannot simply manufacture events that will fit your needs. Nothing turns off social communities like a hint of false charity or self-serving publicity. Those who try to force the process, to use social networking as a mere marketing tool, miss out on the real and valuable benefits they could be reaping. They do not realize that social network users are immune to hype and are quick to pick up on the least sign of artifice.

Facebook is becoming increasingly restrictive about what it shows to users who are not actively involved with the pages they like. Strong human-interest stories, such as Austin's, help bring even dormant users into the circle of commentary and sharing. This expands your social reach and increases visibility exponentially.

If your practice is not using Facebook, it should be. If your practice does not have a social media plan, it should have one. Without a presence, your practice will not have the ability to share important moments, and the chances of a viral explosion such as what happened for Ocean Springs Dental are slim.

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Once your Facebook Page is operational, it is important to stay active by connecting with other users on the platform and encouraging interaction. Day-to-day posting, with special attention to determining what times of day and what days of the week get the most feedback and quick response to questions or concerns, is mandatory.

Let your patients know about your Facebook page. Offer an incentive for them to check out and like your practice's page, and then stay in touch. Let them know when they have been selected Patient of the Week.

Don't forget to ask for feedback and reviews from happy patients. No matter how good your practice's Facebook posts are, one from a happy, ecstatic patient is easily worth 20 normal posts. If the patient posts a picture of his or her smile, this boosts the value to 100.

After developing a sturdy foundation, you can consider what your next billboard moment could be. Again, do not plan actions solely with marketing in mind. Remember, social media users are quick to spot a ploy. Rather, look at the techniques you're already doing and consider how to present them to your audience.

This does not mean you cannot look for additional avenues of community service. It does not take a headline about a beaten teenager to provide your practice with an opportunity to help someone in need.

One Atlanta-based dentist regularly tracks down uninsured teens with braces they are unable to maintain and provides the remainder of their treatment for free. Everyone has teeth, and they don't have to already be in the news to be worthy of a little help.

Always be aware of what your practice is doing that can be talked about, then share that with your online community in a fun, easy-to-engage way. Steer clear of self-congratulations, and focus on your followers instead. Ask for input, online and from your staff. Great ideas can come from anywhere.

If a member of your staff volunteers for a charity or participates in a marathon, get the team to chip in and support the cause. Post results to your Facebook page with as many images as possible.

You also can create opportunities to connect with your community in your office. Last year, many dental practices were hosts for events to benefit patients and communities, such as holding school supply drives or Halloween candy buy-back programs. A little effort goes a long way.

Consider social media, Facebook in particular, as one of the easiest ways to directly connect with your patient community, and to attract new patients to the practice. Start taking advantage of social media today. **DE**



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