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Adapt or Perish: Marketing Your Practice in the Digital Age

For mutual funds or other financial products, a common statement on the prospectus is that past performance is no guarantee of future results. The same is true for marketing your orthodontic practice. What was done six months or six years ago may not have the same effect today.

It is critical that doctors and their team adjust their marketing mind-set, and adapt to the new digital world to improve future growth. In the past, the big ate the small. Mom-and-pop businesses couldn't compete with giants like Walmart that offered more variety at cheaper prices.

In the dot-com age as digital technology took off, it wasn't the big that ate the small, but the fast that ate the slow. Those that embraced Internet marketing are today reaping the benefits of high rankings on Google Page One. Those that were slow to react are often invisible on one of the most powerful and least expensive marketing tools available today.

Profit or Peril

Why can't you just continue with what worked in the past? Here's a telling example of what happened when a Fortune 500 company failed to adjust to the future. In 1976 Eastman Kodak of Rochester, New York, held 90% market share of U.S. photographic film sales. Today they are in bankruptcy proceedings. Kodak was too late in adapting to digital technology, and consumers passed it by. In the business world, companies that fail to adapt to the latest trends struggle and perish.

In a lackluster economy, general dentists and orthodontists compete for an ever-shrinking market share. Consumers have adapted new research and buying habits powered by the Internet. Word-of-mouth is now "world-of-mouth" thanks to social media, online reviews, and blogs.

There has never been a silver bullet when it comes to marketing your practice. As always, a solid foundation of good treatment delivery and outstanding professional services are key. But to cover all the bases, a

by **Mary Kay Miller**

comprehensive marketing strategy should include internal, external, and Internet tactics for best long-term results. Unfortunately, when the economy is bad, most practices reduce their marketing budget rather than kicking it up a notch to attract new patients.

What to Do?

For years some practices were able to build and maintain growth based only on reputation. There was no reason to engage the Internet as a favored form of marketing. Now it's difficult to compete in a digital world where patient and peer opinion — and the ability to promote a practice — supersedes general dental referrals.

Consumers today listen to their friends and research online before making buying decisions. If your practice isn't up front, visible, and in their face at the exact moment they are looking online, you will lose them to a competitor. Like it or not, this is today's marketing reality.

Adapting to the Internet marketing revolution means focusing on four basic aspects:

1. Be seen, be found
2. Understand consumer habits
3. Adapt to trends
4. Stay up-to-date

To ensure visibility, work toward a Page One ranking on Google. Engage patients with what they want to know and manage your reputation with positive peer reviews on major search engines and professional sites. Make sure that your website is easy to navigate and up-to-date. All are needed to succeed.

Google: The 600 lb. Gorilla

Eighty percent of online success is showing up on

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Google. While Google dominates Internet marketing, not every algorithm update affects your website ranking. Yet Google bestows higher rankings on what it considers a good consumer experience and it rewards quality website design, easy navigation, and appealingly written content.

What happens when a prospective new patient googles your name? Have you looked recently? What they find can make or break your practice. Understanding how Google organizes and ranks this information can also affect your marketing success.

Consumer Habits

The first thing to understand about consumers' buying habits is that it's all about them, not you. As a marketer, it is your job to tell your prospects what they want to know, NOT what you want to tell them. Once you figure out what your prospective patients want to know, you must figure out the best way to present that information.

For example, patients use local search to find out possibilities. They get Google recommendations from friends and referring professionals. They react to information immediately, including your website design and reviews. These potential touch points offer immediate avenues for marketing.

Adapt to Trends

Many services are available today to help manage your marketing efforts. But not all offer results as advertised. How do you determine what's best for you?

Again, the short answer is to look at what your patients want. While the latest trends and formats don't always work for all types of businesses, many practices are finding that mobile smart phones and digital tablets are highly favored among patients based on Google Analytics. Mobile searches have grown by four times since 2010 (Source: Google Mobile Optimization Webinar, 2011). By 2013, more people will use their mobile phones than PCs to get online (Source: Gartner, 2010).

Are You Up to Speed with Mobile?

Users have a much different experience on mobile devices or tablets than on a laptop or desktop computer. For starters, the screen is considerably smaller, and uses touch screen technology

differs from a computer mouse or a track pad.

To offer a great consumer experience on all devices means creating a separate mobile site with the ability to deliver content in a simplified format. Too often in orthodontics, information is text based and does not adapt well to responsive website design across multiple platforms. A mirror image of your website requires too much scrolling on a smart phone and provides too much info that's not easily managed. Your mobile site must have the ability to modify and direct content.

Smartphone users expect information to be organized and

readable. They expect you to provide a pleasant mobile experience quickly, or else they will be moving past your site and your practice. One survey showed 78% of mobile users will retry a site two times or less if it does not load initially (Source: Compuware, "What Users Want from Mobile," 2011).

Rise of the Machine — Google+

Every piece of marketing you put out there is a reflection of your practice. Few would argue that an outdated, archaic website is good for business. But today other Internet and social marketing tools abound. One of these, Google+, not only lets you

combine and customize many different ways to reach patients; it also affects SEO and page ranking.

Google+ is an amalgamation of Google, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, and Skype. It can be used socially to connect with friends, patients, and colleagues. It can be used to browse the Internet and offers video chat like Skype, photo sharing like Tumblr, and posts and events like Facebook all in one.

With Google+ every user creates an identity. If you've seen a little square headshot with a byline pop up next to a search result on Google, that's an example of verified Google+ authorship.

There are other changes as well. For example, in May 2012 every Google Places page in the world (all 80 million of them) became a Google+ Local page. There have been many adjustments in the very short time since Google+ Local debuted. Google is tinkering. But this kind of migration often brings unexpected consequences as well. Some business owners faced complete chaos in search and in Google Maps.

Five Web and Mobile Site Marketing Tips

1. Information first! People want maps or directions, linked phone numbers they can click or tap to call at the top of the site, highlighted products such as Invisalign®, a doctor bio, and Patient Login for appointments.
2. Make sites action oriented. Use links and call-to-action buttons. Get users tapping buttons instead of scrolling for a better experience.
3. Consolidate content. Avoid long passages of text and large images because they are difficult to read or view. Plus the faster your site loads the better it will perform for both users and search bots.
4. Build websites in both .mobi and .com formats. This means a separate domain for your mobile site that is not just a sub-domain of your .com site.
5. Keep scrolling to a minimum. Preferably along only one axis – whether it is up-and-down or side-to-side.

Place pages are still changing, disappearing, or duplicating. Old reviews are vanishing into thin air and difficult for patients to post new reviews. It's hard to keep up in uncertain times.

One thing is certain: the Internet has become more transparent. It is less of a great unknown and more a social network. Orthodontists that put themselves out there, engage patients, and connect content to their Google+ profile will thrive in the years to come. As for the practices that resist change and don't fight their competitors in the digital arena? Well, they may not be around much longer. ☺

About the Author



Mary Kay Miller is an Internet marketing consultant for the orthodontic profession specializing in SEO, WordPress and Mobile Website design, and Exclusive Web 2.0 services. She is presenting at the 2013 UGM in Las Vegas.