Tracking Your Digital Footprint Online

by **Mary Kay Miller**

Marketing today is all about combining the internal, external, and online promotion of your practice. When it comes to the online sector of marketing, the only constant is change.

In the past, Internet marketing was all about keywords, back linking, and online distribution of written content. Quantity was weighted more heavily than quality. Now, with the exception of website hits or "clicks" still being a large indicator of success, it is quality that determines the winners and losers in local searches.

The days of "more must be better" for ranking online are over. Search engines have become too sophisticated to be tricked. Today it is more about efficient website design, consistency of business information, originality and depth of written content, and social media marketing with reviews. The sum of these online ranking factors adds up to what is known as your digital footprint.

What is a Digital Footprint?

Your digital footprint is perhaps the most important piece of information that exists on the Internet concerning you and your practice. It informs the search engines – especially Google – who you are, what you do, and your contact information (registered corporate name, office address, phone, and website).

Some of that footprint is the result of effective marketing you have done in the past. If your website has any sort of SEO (search engine optimization) then it impacts your digital footprint. If you verified your business on Google, Yelp, Bing, etc., then you had an impact on your digital footprint.

Consistency is king when it comes to your digital footprint. Ideally, all your listings will share the same Name, Address, and Phone number (NAP), as well as a website URL. Unfortunately, there are hundreds of databases and aggregators that compile and distribute information about thousands of businesses, and seldom do these databases reach out to verify if any of the information is correct.

As a business owner, are you aware your digital footprint is tracked and shared by hundreds of databases and review sites? If you don't control and monitor your digital trail, then any mistakes, omissions, or new developments that naturally occur in today's ever-changing digital marketplace can adversely affect the profitability of your Internet marketing efforts.

How a Digital Footprint is Created

Let's say when you started your practice you registered your corporate name as John Smith DDS PC. As your practice started to grow, you renamed it Smith Orthodontics for branding purposes. You then added a partner, and the practice became Smith and Jones Orthodontics. At that point you decided to change your domain name from Smithortho.com to SmithandJones.com.

Now flash forward. The practice has continued to grow and you purchased land to build a larger facility. When you move into your new office, you will have changed everything about the NAP of your business since it was John Smith DDS PC.

It is your responsibility as a business owner to notify Internet databases, universal aggregators, and any state corporate entities of updates to your NAP information. Unless you vigilantly inform search engines, databases, and review sites about a change, your digital footprint may be based on outdated information. This doesn't just confuse or mislead potential patients online; it fosters distrust from the search engines.

Google is continually ranking and funneling information based on multiple criteria in its various algorithms. Some of the most important ranking factors are history, traffic

to your website, reviews, and consistent branding on all digital formats. What worked for you in the past may work against you today if your digital footprint and reputation marketing have been neglected over the years.

Social Media and Online Reviews
Social media is another area that affects your digital footprint and what visitors see when choosing an orthodontist online. Is your social media set up consistently across Facebook, YouTube, Google+, and Twitter?

The engagement that an orthodontic practice will receive on social media varies greatly. However, you want to make sure your practice is represented on the major social media sites even if the interaction is minimal. Having a page or a profile is still a useful tool for unifying your online brand.

Many practices have the misconception that reputation management is all about reviews. While reviews reinforce credibility and trust for your online brand, they are not the sole requirement of reputation management.

If your NAP is inconsistent, then potential patients may find drastically different representations of your business based on what search terms they use. For example, a search for John Smith DDS PC may turn up very different results from a search for Smith and Jones Orthodontics.

The greater the number of reviews that you have, either favorable or unfavorable, the greater the effect they will have on your placement in both organic and Maps rankings when someone googles your personal name, business name, or does a broad search for an orthodontist in your local area.

A word to the wise: do not focus all of your energy on gaining reviews for just one website, i.e. Google, Yelp, Healthgrades, Demandforce, etc. Instead, strive to establish a well-rounded review portfolio with several positive reviews on five to ten different review sites.

New Rules Create New Problems
The Internet is imperfect by nature and the rules are always changing. With today's reputation marketing, you must not only know what has changed but how to adapt. In order to move up or stay on top in ranking, business owners must keep up with the changes or risk the loss of visibility at a moment's notice.

In some areas, even though the online branding is consistent, practices are losing visibility based on Google's latest local search algorithms. Recent updates have placed high importance on geotargeting which evaluates office locations as they relate to a city or town's geographic center.

Google's algorithm determines a centroid for each search area, whether it is a city, town, or village. The Maps rankings are now heavily impacted by the conclusions Google draws from evaluating businesses and how they are positioned around the centroid. Sometimes population density can play a role in how Google determines the centroid. It is all quite fluid and difficult to predict.

Practices that border multiple communities are often adversely impacted in the Maps area, based solely on their physical location. Keyword coding and off-site SEO are no longer as influential as they once were. Today, it is more about NAP, reviews, website history, and your location in relationship to the Google centroid in your local search area.

Google Reviews are Your Top Priority
Since 75 – 80% of orthodontic consumers use Google as their search engine of choice (based on Google Analytics reports for orthodontic websites), Google comes first when gathering reviews from patients. Google will show your listing first, with reviews, when someone performs a search for your personal name or branded name. Practices with the most reviews often earn higher rankings (but not always).

Yelp is Not Far Behind
Yelp is especially influential in California and the NYC area. I do not find Yelp to be as popular in smaller markets. However, its sheer strength in numbers based on those two heavily populated areas allows Yelp to dominate Google search nationally.

Even though Yelp has the strictest and most frustrating filters of any review site, they can have a huge positive or negative impact on your reputation marketing. First-time Yelpers will almost always have their review filtered out. The goal is to find Yelpers who leave reviews regularly to write positive reviews for best results.

Demandforce and HealthGrades
According to the latest dental review statistic reports, Demandforce is third-most important behind Google and Yelp. I personally see a toss-up between Demandforce and Healthgrades.com.

Since Demandforce is a paid service and Healthgrades.com is a free service (and the easiest to post reviews of all the review sites), I recommend spending time building reviews on Healthgrades.com unless you are a current Demandforce client.

As food for thought, Google Trends lists 1800dentist as the second-most popular dental review site, and I often see RateMDs.com on many local search results pages when doing research for my orthodontic clients. Normally dental review sites rank ahead of local business review sites in most local search results.

The search results will vary from place to place, so I recommend testing to determine which review sites take priority in your area.

How to Test Your Own Online Visibility

Google your name, practice name, and location and see what comes up. Is the information accurate? Next, do a general search for your practice specialty to see how you rank among your competitors. Not all rules apply in all situations and demographics. That is why I always evaluate each practice on an individual basis.

Is your practice found on page one of local search on Google in both organic ranking and in the Maps area? If you are ranking high in organic but not in the Maps area, this is an indication you have a branding issue or problem with your Google My Business setup. In the past five years, practices that moved, changed a business name, or came under new ownership and did not notify the Internet are most adversely affected by the new Google algorithm.

You cannot blindly trust the Internet to figure out your business while you simply hope for the best. Be proactive in tracking your digital footprint to maintain your profitability online. ♺

About the Author

Mary Kay Miller is an Internet Marketing Consultant for the orthodontic profession specializing in SEO, WordPress Website Design, Exclusive Web 2.0 services, and Mobile Marketing.