2012 is the year that social media finally takes hold in dental. If you do not believe this, then I apologize for this interruption and you can go back to your music on eight-track tapes. It’s been widely proven that social media is a very effective tool when used properly to promote a person, product, company or brand.

Yet, before you go crazy and start posting, pinning and tweeting, take a few minutes and think about the big picture and how it works within your existing/ traditional marketing plan.

Social media alone will not save your practice. If you are a sub-standard dentist with an out-of-date practice and snarky staff members, social media is not going to change any of that.

It’s important to have it in your tool belt, but you don’t want to drive nails with it and it won’t measure a piece of wood. A good tool belt has all the basics that serve specific purposes and work to create something bigger.

Social media is just one tool in your belt. Before we jump into marketing and social media, here are some basic facts on consumer buying habits from a recent Gallup Poll (Table 1)¹ that demonstrate the power of social media:

• 14 percent of consumers trust advertisements
• 78 percent trust peer recommendations
• Spouses influence consumers’ decisions more than anything else
• Strangers influence consumers’ decisions more than advertising
• 25 percent of search results for top brands are links to user-generated content

**Table 1.** Key influences on customer decisions. Customers are far more likely to rely on personal recommendations from a spouse or from close friends and family in making decisions rather than company-sponsored online ads, Facebook pages or Twitter feeds.
(Source/Gallup)
Hi. My name is John. I’m a dentist and I dislike Facebook.

The first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem. And the problem is integrating social media into your dental practice.

Let’s get real. You did not become a dentist to learn social media. And you don’t want to be messing around on Facebook and Twitter in-between patients or in your free time – you’re just not wired that way. You are highly trained to diagnose your patients’ oral health and give them the smile they desire.

Let’s face it, this is something your team should be doing – NOT YOU. As a dentist, you don’t answer the phone. You don’t schedule patients. And you don’t do social media. And no matter what the so-called experts and publications say, you cannot learn social media on a free webinar or do it in 5 minutes a day.

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All this means is that different people are influenced in different ways, and it’s clear that referrals from family, friends and strangers are as important as ever. Make sure you are covering your bases and communicating with your targeted group the correct way.

**Step 1: Get your brand right**

The very first step is to make sure that what you are broadcasting to the world represents you and your practice in the way you want to be seen. If you already know who you are and what kind of practice you are, then skip ahead. However, if you’re like many dentists, you’re not sure what your brand is — maybe you don’t even know what a brand is and how it’s relevant to you, a dentist. While the word brand can mean different things to different people, most would agree that a brand is not a tangible thing. It is not a car. It is not a logo. It is not a bottle of beer. It is not a dentist office.

A brand is a consumer’s overall feeling and impression of you and your practice that affects whether or not he or she will use your product or service. For example, Nike’s brand is not the shoe or even the logo on the shoes — it’s the feeling you get when you put the shoes on that makes you think you could hang with Michael Jordan in a game of one on one. That feeling is what allows Nike to charge a premium for its product when you could probably do just fine in a pair of PF Flyers.

OK, so now that we “sorta, kinda” know what a brand is, the next step is defining your brand. What do you want people to feel when they hear your name or walk into your office?

- Are you a high-tech dentist with CAD/CAM, cone-beam and lasers? Then, you are a high-tech dentist and your patients should know that.
- Do you donate to worthy causes and volunteer in the community? Then, you are a warm-fuzzy dentist and your patients should know that.
- Do you see a ton of kids and they all think you are cool (for a dentist)? Then, you are family-friendly practice.
- Do you speak at tradeshows, corporations and traveling sideshows? Then you are an expert and your patients should know that.
- Do you use social media to promote your practice and connect with your patients? Then, you’re a social media dentist.

**Step 2: Re-evaluate your traditional marketing**

It’s easy these days to jump full-bore into social media and forget about all of the traditional marketing methods that have worked in the past and are still relevant. Here are a few basics that you should still be doing.

**Optimize your website**

It’s 2012. Your website should be simple, full of pictures (and video) and easily updateable. If your website requires a Java programmer from another planet to update a picture or some text, your site is not easy to update. Make 2012 the year you simplify your website.

Invest in a quality website design, but remember that it doesn’t have to cost a small fortune. The vast majority of your new patients will check out your website before they agree to have you poke around their mouth.

Besides a personal referral, your website is the single biggest factor on whether they will become a new patient, so spend a few $1,000 and hire a professional. Hire a professional and you won’t regret it or need to re-build it in six months. If you already have a workable site, then make sure it is easy to use and can do the following things:

- Patients can make an appointment on your site
- Contact information should be easy to locate
- One-click driving directions (with a big map)
- Pictures of your office and staff
- Testimonials from existing patients (videos)
- Before and after images of existing patients
- Finally, consider referring to Google Analytics to see how patients currently use your website

**Search Engine Optimization**

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) simply means that your website is easy to find. SEO makes sure that when a potential patient types in certain keywords into a search engine (such as “cosmetic dentist Fresno
CA”), your website will come up higher in the list than your competitors. Other questions to consider:

- Are new patients able to find you online without scrolling past all of the competition first?
- Do the search engines even know you exist?
- If you are not doing SEO, get going quickly.

**E-mail and text**

Countless studies have shown that it’s easier to keep an existing patient than it is to find a new one. And because your patients do not want you to stop by for Sunday dinner or call them at home, you should ask them how they want to be contacted.

E-mail is now one of the most trusted brand communication channels because (nearly) everyone uses e-mail. In addition, there are still plenty of people that are either not using social media at all or just use it casually. By now, you should have exported or mail-merged a list out of your practice management software. Contact this list monthly with timely reminders or holiday promotions and bonus points, or consider one-to-one e-mails as they are even more effective.

**Radio and TV ads, direct mail**

Depending on your market and your brand message, these tried-and-true methods might still be right for you. I personally know several dentists who successfully run TV and radio ads to bring in new patients.

**Step 3: Optimize social media**

You’re probably thinking, man, did I have to read a lot of words just to get the part about social media. Congratulations, you made it! Here are the basic stats on social media:

- 901 million Facebook users worldwide
- 800 million users on YouTube every month
- 1 trillion video playbacks on YouTube
- 225 million Twitter accounts
- 100 million Twitter users worldwide (44 percent are only reading and not posting)

**Set goals**

What would you consider to be a successful marketing result before you begin? Revenue, number of new patients, phone calls per day, etc.?

**Identify your target audience**

As with any type of marketing campaign, you need to know whom you are talking to before you start talking. Who makes your practice what it is? Go where they are. If your practice is younger and you see a lot of kids, then your strategy will be different than an adult practice in a rural area.

**Setup your social-media platform**

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc., ... the venues you should choose are based on your personality and your target audience behavior. These venues will be your home base for outbound social media campaigns and provide a place for your happy patients to share their experiences.

It’s now relatively easy to tie all of your social personas together so that when you post a video on YouTube, it automatically sends a Facebook post and Twitter feed. Tools such as HootSuite and TweetDeck make this process extremely easy to accomplish.

**Optimize your blog (SEO)**

Does your practice maintain a daily blog where you and your staff can share news and information about what’s going in the office? Blogs and video are the main drivers of new search engine traffic to your website. If you have already optimized your website, a blog will bring you new patients or good prospects when they see how involved your practice is with its patients.

**Manage your reputation**

Profiles on review sites are incredibly important. These are places where patients go specifically to rate your services. Google Places, Yelp, Manta, Angie’s List and others are but a few of the many that are out there. Make sure your information on these sites is correct and then make sure to have them monitored for any reviews that appear.

It is important that you ask your patients for good reviews, but it is also important to respond to any negative reviews that might show up. Believe it or not, a great response to a negative review can actually drive patients into your office.

**Start posting and feed the social engine**

Once you’re optimized and your social media platform is set-up, you are ready to create a content calendar and work it into your monthly, weekly and sometimes daily routine.

You don’t need to post every minute of every day — leave that to the Kardashians — but you should post a few times a week to keep things fresh. This should be a team effort, so you will not be doing this yourself. Surprisingly, this will be the hardest thing to implement into your practice as it requires time, skill and consistency.

Facebook: Pictures are worth 1,000 fans

Facebook deserves special mention and it is literally a book of faces. Happy, smiling patients, staff, family and friends are what prospective fans want to see.

So dust off that Flip video camera and photograph or video something … anything. The more ways you
Step 4: Engage and integrate

Consumer engagement is a big buzz term these days. The days of engaging with your patients once every six months chairside is long gone and about as effective as a Yellow Pages ad. Your patients want more from you. You just have to figure out what they want and how often they want it.

Maybe it’s a promotion or a news story about your practice or a new hire. Give them something or they will eventually connect with a dentist who they feel wants them more than you do.

No marketing strategy is a silver bullet. Integrate social media into traditional marketing with promotions, contests and giveaways. Most importantly, try something new and have fun engaging with your patients.

If the experience is fun for your patients, you will get the result you most desire: happy paying customers who will refer their friends, families and even strangers!

Step 5: Track and repeat

If your front desk is not asking new patients what brought them in the door, you have no idea what is working and what isn’t.

John Wanamaker said it best when he said, “I know that half of my advertising dollars are wasted, I just don’t know which half.” The thing is that he said that more than 100 years ago (just before indoor plumbing and social media). You can do better, and it’s really not very difficult.

Tracking success is vital in the new marketing age. I encourage you to figure out what is working and keep doing it until it doesn’t work anymore.

This will be the easiest change you can make immediately. Google Analytics is a free, industry-leading resource. Sign up, add it to your sites and learn each time to do better next time.

So, dust off your tool belt and add a little social media to your arsenal.

At this point, the question isn’t really if you’re going to participate in social media, it’s how well do you want to do it.

References

1. businessjournal.gallup.com/content/148694/Social-Media-Three-Big-Myths.aspx