Word-of-mouth 2.0
How leveraging one's online reputation can help attract new patients

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It is an undisputed fact that in the world of dentistry, no amount of advertising or fancy marketing can beat the power of word-of-mouth referrals from your satisfied patients. What your patients say about you is the ultimate driver of your business success. Today, consumers turn to the Internet to locate and select a dental practice. Understanding this and using the right tools will help you create and maintain the most relevant, valuable practice builder you’ll ever have: the exchange and feedback of your own patients shared with millions of prospective patients actively seeking a new dental practice. It’s up to you to choose: will your online reputation consist of a single thread of random gossip, or will it become your most valued asset, carefully managed and nurtured to give you the best return on your investment?

Every person knows consumers will share a good experience with a few people, but they’ll make a point of telling the world about a negative one. As a service provider, you and your staff are your brand. You don’t sell widgets; you sell your skills, experience, specialties, personalities, hours and location—and your very existence and livelihood depend on your reputation.

We all work hard to ensure our patients have a good experience and ask that you refer your friends and family based on this. Now, take that same valuable scenario, expand it to hundreds and thousands of prospective patients, and you’ve just moved from the world of offline word-of-mouth referrals to the sophisticated new world of online reputation-based marketing—or word-of-mouth 2.0.

We know that in the growing world of online reviews, consumers want and expect to find the local user information they seek, whether it’s a great Italian restaurant or up-to-date notch cosmetic dental practice. As the Internet has come of age, consumers have come to expect availability for goods and services without your control—and there has been nothing you could do to manage this exposure, until now.

Driving patient volumes
As you probably know, the largest and most powerful search engine is Google. Today, 67 per cent of all online searches are conducted using Google. Google sees 3.2 billion search visits per month. You can optimise your web site to come up in the free, natural search results when prospective patients google a dental practice. If you choose to pay for exposure, you can subscribe to Google Adwords ((https://adwords.google.com/select/Lavine)), paying for each ‘click’ generated from Google to your web site. The higher you bid for a click, the higher your placement in the sponsored section of Google.

There are many dental practices that bid more than £4 per every click, resulting in thousands of pounds spent on Adwords each month. One particular practice I am aware of spends more than £2,000 a month on Adwords and claims the cost is “worth every penny.” As with all advertising, there are limitations, even beyond expense. Ads are companions promoting themselves, and today’s savvy consumer recognises this and filters information accordingly.

However, even the world’s leading search engine recognises the extreme power and relevance of word-of-mouth feedback. Google recently expanded its offerings to enable consumers to search for and compare local businesses online. Try searching for a dentist in your area by typing in your postcode followed by the word “dentist” in the Google search bar. It’s a huge box. A map with a listing requires time and effort on your patients’ part, and staff time to inform patients and promote the process. Even if your staff are dedicated to making your patients aware of the online review process, you can only hope patients remember to follow through once they get back to their busy schedules at home and work. How your guide, a passive approach will result in one or two reviews posted over the course of several months.

The proactive approach: today, the only integrated approach to proactively managing your online reputation on Google is through companies such as Demandforce (http://demandforce.com/), an online patient-communication company. They recently announced a data integration agreement with Google that enables dental practices to populate their Google profiles easily, including posting reviews directly from data originating from their communication systems.

With Demandforce, each patient is automatically sent a thank-you e-mail message after each appointment. As part of the thank-you, you can choose to submit a confidential survey of their visit, as well as a public review. You can read the reviews of your practice and post a response or ask for a review to be removed if it does not meet standard posting requirements. After seven days, the data is automatically sent to Google to populate your profile.

Demandforce will optimise your profile by submitting additional information such as specialties, languages spoken, insurance accepted, hours of operation and affiliations. You can also choose to integrate online scheduling directly into your profile. The new Google review functionality is included at no additional cost with a standard monthly subscription.

Whether you opt to take a passive approach or a proactive approach to building your online reputation, I highly recommend you take control to ensure it accurately reflects and therefore benefits your practice. Your online reputation is your business and those practices that realise this early on will have a significant head start over their peers.

Solicited or not, online reviews are here to stay. Your patients’ satisfaction and their resulting word-of-mouth referrals will always be our bread and butter; only the serving plate has changed. What are you doing to shape your online reputation? Have you googled your practice or your competitors lately?

“...it is highly likely you already have an online reputation, and may not even know it”