**Word-of-mouth 2.0**

Dr Lorne Lavine talks about how leveraging your online reputation can help you to attract new patients

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It is an undisputed fact that in the world of dentistry, no amount of expensive 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 business success.

Today, consumers increasingly turn to the internet to locate and select a dental practice. Understanding this phenomenon and using the right tools will help you create and maintain the most relevant, valuable practice builder you’ll ever have: the experience and feedback of your own patients, shared with millions of prospective patients actively seeking a new dental practice. If 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 valuable practice builder? 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 valuable practice builder?

Your online reputation

We know 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 a top-notch cosmetic dental practice. As the internet has come of age, our unified scenario, expand it to hundreds and even thousands of potential 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.

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 5.2 billion visits per month. As a dental practice, you can optimise your website to come up in the 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 post code followed by the word ‘dentist’ in the Google search box. A map with a list of 10 dental practices is displayed above all other natural search results. To the far right of each listing is a link to ‘reviews.’ This is where a consumer can view what your patients say about your practice. Google has put the referral jackpot: this functionality leverages consumer relationships and capitalises on the inherent credibility of the first-person testimonial. This is a priceless intangible—something advertising dollars just can’t buy.

Build your reputation

So how do you, as a dentist, take advantage of this new tool to guide and shape your online reputation? It is important to remember that this is not a practice snapshot in time, but rather a reputation built and sustained over time. Your best chance of maintaining and protecting a top 10 placement is to be among the first to populate your Google profile—and to keep a steady stream of relevant reviews and quality practice information flowing in to Google. You can do one of two ways: passively or actively.

The passive approach—You can hope the patients who visit your practice have the wherewithal to create a Google account, find your Google profile, and submit a review. This requires time and effort on your patients’ part, and staff time to inform patients and promote the process. Even if your staff is dedicated to making your patients aware of the online review process, you can only hope they remember to follow through once they go back to their busy schedules at home and work. If history is any 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 in 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 easily populate their Google profiles, including posting reviews, directly from data originating from their communication system. With Demandforce, each patient is automatically sent a thank you email message after each appointment. As part of the thank you, they can choose to submit a confidential survey of their visit as well as a publicly visible review. Practices can read the reviews 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.

This proactive approach results in dozens of reviews being posted to your profile every month.

Whether you opt to take a passive approach or make a proactive approach to building your online reputation, I highly recommend you take charge to ensure it accurately reflects and therefore benefits your practice.

Your online reputation is your business and those practices that realise it early on will have a significant head start over their peers.

Bread and butter

Solicited or not, online reviews are here to stay. Our patients’ satisfaction and their resulting word-of-mouth referrals will always be our bread and butter; only the serving size will change. Are you doing to shape your online reputation? Have you “Googled” your practice or your competitors lately?

Dr Lorne Lavine will be speaking at the British Academy’s sixth Annual Conference, titled ‘The Future of Dentistry’ on 19 to 21 November 2009 at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC). To reserve your place, visit www.bacd.com or contact Suzy Rowlands on 0207 612 4166 or by emailing info@bacd.com.

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**About the author**

Dr Lorne Lavine is founder and president of Dental Technology Consultants, focusing on the unique technical needs of the dental community. A consultant and integrator with extensive hands-on experience with software and technology in dentistry, he writes for many well-known industry publications, lectures widely, is a former Hawaiian health service’s former technology consultant.