Word-of-mouth 2.0

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

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 people; the experience and feedback of their friends and family who will share a good experience with a few people, but they’ll be talking 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 we ask our patients for the referrals of their friends and family when they have a good experience. Now, take that most valuable 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.

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 uniquely valued asset, carefully managed or will it become your most valuable practice building? We all work hard to ensure that your online reputation consists of a company 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 people; the experience and feedback of their friends and family who will share a good experience with a few people, but they’ll be talking 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 we ask our patients for the referrals of their friends and family when they have a good experience. Now, take that most valuable 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.

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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 visits per month. As a dental practice, you can optimise your website to come up in the top 10 list of results when someone searches for “dentist.”

It’s up to you to choose: will your online reputation be a return to neighbourhood intimacy – and neighborhood dependence on your reputation? It is important to remember that this is not a practical snapshot in time, but rather a reputation built and sustained over time. Your best chance of maintaining and securing 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 this 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 write 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, the 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 is Google 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 communications system. With Demandforce, each patient is automatically sent a thank you email message the day after each appointment. Part of the thank you, they can choose to submit a confidential survey of their visit as well as a public 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.

Have you opted to take a passive approach or more of a proactive approach to build 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 recommendations are key to our future. There are a few areas of focus that realise it early on will have a significant head start over their peers.

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 state of the dental technology and software needs of the dental community. A consultant and integrator with extensive hands-on experience with software technology for dentistry, he writes for many well-known industry publications, lectures widely and is the dental industry’s most popular technology consultant.