**Word of mouth on digital steroids**

Dental Tribune’s Laura Hatton looks at the pros and cons of dental practices on Facebook

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lotting quite nicely into the twenty-something age bracket, I should be stereotyped as part of the online generation, interacting via computer speak and visualising life as though everything was four dimensional. Having grown up in a technological blogosphere, this judgement should be right. However, even though I remain a twenty-something individual, I have recoiled from the Facebook phenomenon and remain impartial to the world it stands for.

Inundated with narcissism, Facebook has spanned the world as though it has lived a thousand lives. It has been nurtured and moulded into a popular activity of modern society and as a result, the social networking site has gone viral. Facebook is a search engine in itself. ‘Looking for a company? Find it on Facebook’ and it is this meteoric rise in search queries that has given Facebook its edge. Every ounce of information that can be displayed is there, in the format of status updates, wall posts and photo albums. Everyone has a Facebook page and its edge. Every ounce of information that can be displayed is there, in the format of status updates, wall posts and profile pictures.

As a result, social media has become a catalyst for marketing and communication in a way that no one could have predicted.

**Brand Business**

Looking at the facts it can’t be disputed that Facebook is a great tool to sell a company’s brand: in 2009, 200 million people had joined Facebook and in July 2010, 500 million people had a Facebook page. Even Coca Cola, one of the biggest companies in the world, has a Facebook page and 21,907,247 liked their most recent video. However, as far as advertising is concerned, for years companies have been in control of their product and the way it is put out into the world – but now the ball is in the other court and the consumers are in control. Consumers own networking sites and so it has become imperative for companies to delve into the realm of social media; they no longer need to simply sell a product, they need to sell their story. Recognising the marketing potentials that social media holds over the world, dental practices have started shifting into the unchartered territory of Facebook. But from a dentist’s point of view, is Facebook really a good choice for marketing?

A shift in economics

Seeking a public response to this question I leapt into the role of the marketer and headed to the masses to find out what potential patients really thought about their dentist being on Facebook. Responses included that adding your dentist on Facebook wasn’t professional and that patients only want to visit the dentist when there is a problem. “Would you add your doctor on Facebook? Or like your hospital?!” soon became the theme of discussions and answers generated questions, like why would a dentist want to be on Facebook? The answer came down to one possible solution: it’s not to gain friends, but to gain patients.

For people in the medical sector, Facebook is undoubtedly a great place to connect and share ideas; however, in the pursuit of gaining patients, there seems to be two quite different possible outcomes that the practice could face:

1. The dental practice would look desperate, awkward and unprofessional, especially if the photos were of the Christmas Party or days out. The ‘wall’ could be infiltrated with people who posted messages that you would rather not appear on screen etc.

2. The dental practice could look up-to-date and modern, providing a platform to share information and generate a dental presence in virtual society.

**Perspective**

Unable to make a conclusion so early on in my enquiries, I spoke to an expert in social media marketing for dental professionals, Rita Zamora, to try and gain some perspective as to what direction a dentist should travel in if they decide to journey down the Facebook route.

Rita discussed several options that dentists could adhere to. Firstly, she suggested that dentists should keep dental related content to a minimum and keep in mind that Facebook is fun and social. Posts could include information about donations that the practice or dentist is making and celebrations such as anniversaries and post news about awards and achievements.

“Success can be achieved by exploring new areas of social networking, having fun, and building relationships with patients.” Rita suggested, “it’s all about finding that common ground.”

**Vivid Lime**

Not entirely convinced I decided to seek a different perspective and spoke to Head of Digital at online advertising and marketing group Vivid Lime, Ifty Ahmed. Ifty explained to me that Facebook could in fact be used in a professional manner. He suggested that say, for example, the main objectives for a dental practice to have Facebook were to gain patients, deal with customer issues, to ‘air’ the dental practice and recruit staff – then having a Facebook page could provide a platform for achieving all these goals. However, I remained slightly scepti-
Enlightening me to his approach.

Ilfy explained that using links in the correct formats (Linked-in for example) throughout the profile page could result in viewers subscribing to a service via links to the main practice website; the ‘wall’ would provide a platform for customers to leave feedback, and for the practice to promote special offers, and finally, there can be links back to the practice website for people to leave their CV, browse products, check out those special offers and most importantly, book appointments. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that you can monitor the click and viewing rate using the measurement tools in Account Settings.

“In response to dentists,” Ilfy added, “it could be the difference between gaining patients from the NHS to gaining patients who wish to go private.”

Haven

Ilfy went on to say that Facebook generates a haven of marketing potential: The site supports the provider’s main destination (their website) and offers a place for feedback and future development. But is this really the way forward for dentists when it comes to gaining patients and pushing their practice out into the spotlight?

To answer this question I needed to consider how Facebook stands in relation to marketing.

Word of mouth on digital steroids

One of the basic principles of marketing is delivering your message to as many people as possible. With this in mind Facebook can be a powerful recruitment tool, and even though shifts from the traditional practice of communication have somewhat altered the way in which consumers search for services and the way that companies deliver their products, the basics remain intact.

Erik Qualman, the author of Socialnomics, wrote that social networking is like word of mouth on digital steroids and if used appropriately, social networking can be a weapon in the advertising world.

“Take, for example, two people having a conversation,” Rita explained, “the conversation is short term and limited to the two people involved. Place this conversation on Facebook and the conversation is available to a far greater audience. The conversation becomes long lasting - it has an indefinite shelf life; it can continually be searched for and discovered in search engines and news feeds. It is word of mouth but amplified!”

But the steroids don’t stop working there.

As Ilfy demonstrated, Facebook has a unique advantage: it has the ability to target individuals by checking status updates and then selling products and services directly to the buyer’s needs. To quote Qualman, it is “sophisticated targeting”, providing a platform for interaction with people in a way that no other advertising tool can replicate.

So has Facebook really become a complex advertising tool built on the foundations of word of mouth? In reality, social media is at the core of modern existence, altering how the world communicates and it would seem that no matter what direction I look in, “businesses don’t have the choice on whether or not they do social media; the choice is on how well they do it.”

A marriage made in media

Putting aside the elements of social media, social networking, in whatever way you look at it, is high maintenance. “Think of it like a garden where you have to prepare the soil and then constantly nurture the plants as they grow. You can’t let it run wild otherwise you won’t have the result that you want,” Rita suggested.

Of course, there are other aspects that have to be taken into consideration, such as using the proper type of Facebook account. In some cases, practices mix up personal profiles and fan pages (business pages), which could result in account deletion. (To save this issue from happening dental practices must use a fan page if they wish to broadcast their practice on Facebook.)

Tracing back to the issue of control, if the dentist doesn’t have control of their page or the page content, there is a potential for problems to arise. If you have Facebook you must consider what your posts say and constantly monitor the presence of what people are saying etc. At the end of the day, commitment is the most important aspect of making the most out of any relationship - social media included.

Am I missing something here?

Undeniably, the world has become entangled inside the web of social networking: We breathe in the blogosphere and become socially unaccountable for if we fail to become part of the “social graph.” So all in all, there does seem to be some economic potential of getting involved with social media and putting your face out into that virtual world that is rapidly entangling society. I’m just not sure if Facebook is the right way.

As Rita outlined, social marketing is only “one tool in a box.” There is never simply just one tool to sustain practice marketing and make it flourish, and despite the hullabaloo of social media, websites continue to remain an important function of running a practice.

Never forget that websites turn visitors into phone calls, and phone calls can become patients.

Care in communications

And finally, going back to basics, word of mouth (in whichever form it takes) is the greatest asset to any company or practice. It is real people sharing real experiences, views and opinions. So, take care in communications – it is the life line for any practice.