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 itself (Looking for a company? Find it on Facebook) a thousand lives. It has been used in a professional manner. 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 opinions that dentists could adhere to. Firstly, she suggested that dentists should keep dental

A shift in economies

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.

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, Ify Ahmed. Ify 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 could be 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-
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.

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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 as Ifty demonstrated, Facebook has a unique advantage: it is high maintenance. “Think of it like a garden where you have to constantly nurture the plants as they grow. You can’t let it run wild otherwise you won’t have the result that you want.”

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.”

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 toolbox” and there is never simply just one tool to sustain practice marketing and make it flourish, and despite the hubbub 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.