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 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) 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 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 uncharted 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 leap 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?”

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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.

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21,807,247 liked their most recent post on Facebook. How does Rita believe that a dental practice could use this tool effectively?

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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 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 Ifty 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 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 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 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.

“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 so sure if Facebook is the right way.

As Rita outlined, social marketing is only “one tool in a social box”. 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. 

References

1. Fy. pg. 209 Socialnomics, Erik Qualman
2. Pg. pg. pg Socialnomics, Erik Qualman
3. Pg. pg Socialnomics, Erik Qualman

It is possible to monitor view stats for your fan page.