Embracing online communities

Find patients on Facebook

By Angela Weber, OrthoSynetics

Can an orthodontist build a practice without word-of-mouth? It’s not likely.

At Orthosynetics, a business service firm for orthodontic practices, we find that at least half — and often much more — of our clients’ new patients come from personal and professional referrals. As Americans increasingly gravitate to online communities for their social connections, the word-of-mouth referral stream is moving online, too.

Orthodontists need to position their practices within social networks in order to make referrals easy to pass along.

LinkedIn is a good platform to network among other professionals, and Twitter is for more involved users. But because of its widespread popularity, Facebook is the ideal place for orthodontists interested in social networking to start.

More than 100 million Americans had Facebook accounts at the end of last year, representing a 141 percent annual growth.

Although Facebook focuses on connecting people with their friends, families and colleagues, businesses are welcome, too. The site allows companies large and small to set up their own Facebook pages for free. Somewhat different than profiles, which are for individuals, Facebook pages are designed especially for businesses to interact with their customers in a new way.

Before the Internet, the advertising model was top down. Companies controlled the message and hoped to convince consumers to think great things about a product or service. Now, social networking encourages conversations across the business-customer divide to create personal ties and forge connections. Your office won’t be just a place for your patients to come every so often; it will become part of the fabric of their lives.

Once you set up a page for your orthodontia practice, your next step is to build a following. Through Facebook, patients can become a “fan” of your practice, and once they do, their friends will become aware of your page. They may choose to become fans, too. Even if they don’t right away, Facebook pages allow your patients to give your practice a seal of approval.

It’s simpler than a traditional referral in which two parties have to have an actual conversation about your practice. With Facebook, a prospective patient looking for an orthodontist can happen upon your practice even when the referral source is off doing something else.

A bit of effort is needed to build a sizable following, however. We recommend adding Facebook page links to your Web site and e-mails. Mention it in your mailings, on print advertisements and when talking with patients on the phone or in person.

What’s more, simply having a Facebook page isn’t enough. For it to work as a marketing tool, you need to actively update it. On individual profiles, users type in status updates about what they’re doing or thinking, and the same goes true for a business’s page.

Dental tips and practical reminders work well as content, but we recommend mixing it up with casual comments. It is social networking after all, so keep things social.

You and your staff should feel free to post vacation pictures and to use a conversational tone. And your practice’s daily updates might include, “The office is ordering pizza for lunch” or “We saw that Target is having a sale on Waterpiks.”

Your patients can respond to your postings (and their networks will all know about it). Also, the next day when patients come in, you might be asked about how that pizza lunch went or thanked for posting about that sale.

Some orthodontists worry that bringing Facebook into their offices will distract from their practice. A professional approach can manage this concern. One idea is to assign a single staff member to be in charge of the page and to confine all Facebook activity to certain times of day.

At the same time, hear in mind that Facebook might also spur productivity. Social networking can be a more effective communication tool than a round of phone calls.

When used properly, social networking is an inexpensive way to generate referrals while strengthening ties between your patients and your practice. Right now, some orthodontists may see it as a nice but unnecessary component of a marketing program; however, as social networks continue to move online, a presence on these platforms will become essential.

About the author

Angela Weber is the director of marketing for Orthosynetics, Inc. (OSI), a business service company in the orthodontic and dental industries. She has more than 10 years experience in health-care marketing, working with practices throughout the United States. She knows her way around a profit-and-loss statement, the focus of her marketing strategies is to make a positive impact on the practice’s profitability.

OSI has helped numerous practices achieve marketing success through strategy, creativity and implementation. Expertise includes generating new patient revenue through Internet, mass media and traditional marketing efforts.

At the AAO

Interested in learning more about how social networking can help your practice? Visit Orthosynetics at booth No. 1813. At the booth, learn how to set up a Facebook page for free. Not attending the AAO? Call Angela Weber at (888) 622-7645 for a one-on-one tutorial.