The content craze: How to do it the right way

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Content marketing has become a big thing in recent years, and this promotional technique is only poised to get bigger. When done right, content marketing is quite effective, and it doesn’t need to cost much — just an investment of a couple hours each week or so. Because of its growing importance and low barriers for entry, any orthodontic practice looking to rev up its marketing should consider adopting content marketing to bring in new patients and strengthen relationships with existing ones.

But what is content marketing anyway? It basically is about the creation of articles or entertainment that a business’ customers care about, and this content will directly or indirectly lead to sales. As a marketing tactic, it’s nothing new. The Michelin Guide, which is well known for its prestigious rankings of restaurants, first began in 1900 to provide suggested destinations for motorists who presumably would use Michelin tires to travel. “The Guinness Book of World Records” was created to settle bar bets and spur conversations in pubs where, you guessed it, Guinness was served. It’s been a long-standing practice for airlines to publish in-flight magazines that subtly promote destinations they fly to.

Like so much else, content marketing has moved online, and the current nature of the Internet has allowed it to flourish. Content marketing can take different forms, but to keep things simple for now, just think of it as an ongoing blog posts on your practice’s website.) Here are five reasons to participate in content marketing:

- **Boost search traffic to your site** — Search engines give higher rankings to sites that (a) are updated and fresh and (b) provide users with the information they are looking for. Content marketing satisfies on both counts and has replaced dubious search-engine optimization tricks like keyword stuffing.

- **Increase social media activity** — Content marketing is not social media marketing, but social media enhances your content’s visibility. When you post links to your blog on your practice’s Facebook page or Twitter feed, you’ll give your followers something to respond to while strengthening those networks.

- **Establish expertise** — People online are searching for answers to their questions, including orthodontic ones. Why shouldn’t you be the one who has the answers? Show what you know. Your content can be useful and in demand.

- **Show your practice’s personality** — Unique content created by you and your staff will allow patients to get to know you better, in turn deepening relationships and boosting referrals.

- **Create differentiation** — If a prospective patient were choosing between orthodontists and saw your site overflowing with personality and activity and another site that was bland and static, the scales would definitely tilt to your practice’s favor.

Get with the plan

The difference between social media marketing and online content marketing is that in the former the focus is on creating activity in the social networks themselves, while in the latter your practice’s website is the hub (with social media helping to direct people there). There is some overlap, of course: Some content, like videos or photos, can work well both on a social network and on your own site. In the end, strong content marketing can serve as fantastic fuel for social-network engagement.

Because of the interplay between these online marketing strategies, it might seem a little unclear as to how to put it all together. That’s why before embarking upon a content marketing push, it’s best to start with a plan.

- **Figure out your goals** — Take a look at the five reasons above to participate in content marketing. Which ones do you find the most important? Is there another goal that’s not listed? Decide what you want to achieve first. Then find a way to quantify success. Depending on your goals, that might mean doubled web traffic, a 50 percent increase in referrals, or something else.

- **Research and gather general ideas for content** — One good place to start brainstorming is to ask your employees to make a list of the questions they hear frequently asked. What do people want to know? Think about the conversations you have with patients every day, and use that to generate ideas. And certainly don’t forget to ask some of your patients directly. What sort of content do they say they would be interested in?

- **Decide what content to create** — The content you create will depend on your goals and your research. If you’re going for expertise and authority, you might want to create articles to answer the questions people have. Write patient case studies and offer orthodontic tips. If you’re going for a more personal approach, your content would likely more centered around first-person blog posts and informal videos of what day-to-day life is like in your practice.

- **Plan a content schedule** — The hardest thing about content marketing is generating quality content on a consistent basis. While a robust content marketing campaign is ideal, posting items on your blog just a few times a month is sufficient to see the benefits. Determine what your office can realistically handle, and make sure to calibrate your goals accordingly.

- **Delegate content creation** — Will you create the content yourself, will one staff member do it, or will it be a team effort? Figure out who in your office will create the content and add the task to their list of duties. You may find some staff members will find this endeavor particularly interesting to do.

- **Decide on distribution** — Uploading content to your website and leaving it at that is OK, but to reap greater benefits, you should take advantage of social networks. The problem is there are so many of them. So poll your target audience (during the research stage) and find out which social networks they use the most. Studies also show there are more effective times than others to post for optimal engagement.

Don’t expect thousands of Internet users to come flooding to the first article you post on your blog. Content marketing is not a quick fix for anything. But even if you have posted just two items a month, by the end of the year, you’ll have 24 new pieces of material on your website. That content will be enough to draw attention from search engines, strengthen patient relationships and differentiate you from competitors. Content marketing requires sustained effort but rewards it, too.