Social media basics for orthodontists

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One of the most common buzz words in today's online world is "social media." This article defines social media, explains why it is important to practicing orthodontists, and provides information about how doctors can incorporate it into their practices. Five of the most useful social media tools are described in detail, outlining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks inherent in each. (Am J Orthod Dentofacial Orthop 2012;141:510-5)

Every time we open a web page, look at a magazine, or see a commercial on television, we are bombarded by invitations to “like us on Facebook” or “follow us on Twitter.” Articles by practice consultants in our own professional magazines advise us that our practices cannot survive without a ubiquitous social media presence. Many doctors, however, report putting a lot of time and effort into social media campaigns without seeing much return on their investment. What is social media? Of what value is they to our practices? Which forms of social media are really worth our time and effort as busy orthodontists?

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Internet was basically an online collection of digital brochures that consumers could access to read what companies had to say about themselves in hopes of attracting buyers to their products. It was essentially an electronic version of the pamphlet racks commonly found in the lobbies of hotels advertising local theme parks, outlet malls, and other tourist traps. Internet surfers could read only what companies wanted them to see. It was a one-way street. In the early 2000s, there was a fundamental shift in the way that we perceived the Internet. People in the industry referred to this evolution as Web 2.0.

Web 2.0 is a catchphrase used to describe the new Internet characterized by a proliferation of web applications that facilitate collaboration between users. These interactions occur as reviews, comments, user-generated content, and content sharing. If the old Internet was like a brochure rack, the new Internet is more like an office water cooler where friends gather to discuss events, products, and people. No longer are consumers limited only to the self-serving information provided by the companies selling their products. They now have access to the opinions of their peers whom they trust overwhelmingly more than the advertisements of marketers. The Internet is now a two-way street.

Another change in the way that consumers shop for products and services can best be described as a shift from outbound marketing to inbound marketing. Advertising is everywhere. You cannot pick up a newspaper or magazine, listen to the radio, or watch a television program without being exposed to advertisements. Advertisements that flow outward from a vendor trying to sell a product are considered “outbound marketing.” Consumers do not like to be interrupted, however, and have found ways to avoid advertisements in almost all media. Music lovers can now subscribe to commercial-free satellite radio to avoid the nonstop advertisements on conventional radio stations. Television viewers can now skip over commercials using digital video recorders such as TiVo (TiVo, Alviso, Calif). Newspaper and magazine subscriptions are plummeting as consumers now go online for their news and entertainment. The heyday of Madison Avenue advertising is over as consumers find ways to avoid the interruptive messages.

Today’s consumers do want information about the products and services they need. They just want it only when they are ready to buy, and they care more about what their peers think than what advertisers want them to believe. Enter the era of inbound marketing. Unlike advertisements that interrupt all consumers whether or not they are interested, inbound marketing focuses on providing help and information to buyers when they want it. Examples of inbound marketing include websites, blogs, videos, and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds with updates about products and services that interest the user. (RSS refers to web-based
technology that allows subscribers to automatically receive updated content.) There has been a shift from finding ways to interrupt consumers to providing useful information that is easy to find when it is needed. The science of making our online content easier to find is called "search engine optimization" or SEO. SEO and social media help consumers find what they want when they want it and, more importantly, allow them to see what their peers have to say about it.

Social media are web-based sites and services that facilitate collaboration between users. Although there is no rigid classification system for social media, there are some undisputed categories. These include social networks, blogging, microblogging, content sharing, and product and service reviews. All forms of social media have one thing in common—user collaboration.

Perhaps the most recognizable of all types of social media are social networks. The most popular services in this category are Facebook and LinkedIn. A social network is a group of people who come together because they have something in common. This might be family, friends, hometowns, hobbies, or employment. Social networks allow users to interact via texts, photos, messages, and chatting. Networking sites also allow friends to post, view, and comment on shared information. Not only can we keep informed about events in the lives of our friends, but we can also stay informed about business activities and opportunities.

Blogging is the online publishing of information. The word "blog" is derived from the phrase "web log." A blog is an online journal about any topic that an author wishes to share. Some common blogging services include Blogger, Wordpress, and Typepad. Before Web 2.0, publishing required training, talent, and money. Today, anyone with a computer can publish his or her own blog with no money and little knowhow. Some features common to most blogs are constantly updated content, archived articles, a way to interact with the author, and the ability to subscribe to new posts via e-mail or an RSS feed. Blogging provides user-generated content that attracts consumers (inbound marketing) and encourages user interaction.

A microblog is a small blog. Think of this service as a global text-messaging system. Users post thoughts, links, statuses, and photos that they want to share with the world. Other microbloggers can search for these posts or, more commonly, follow or subscribe to them. Twitter and Tumblr are two of the most common services. Twitter posts, called "tweets," are limited to 140 characters because that is the maximum length of a mobile-phone text message. Although website and blog updates occur on a monthly or weekly basis, Twitter messages are usually updated several times each day. Microblogging is regarded as more of an "as it happens" service.

Media-sharing sites allow users to share and rate videos (YouTube), recommend and discuss music (Pandora and iTunes), and show off photos (Flickr and Picasa). At first glance, it might seem like a stretch to categorize content sharing as social media. The key, however, is that these sites allow users to collaborate as they share links, make recommendations, and comment on the content. This social component allows users to more quickly find content that is entertaining or useful. Media-sharing sites can also be combined with other social media services such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to allow the inclusion (via links) of content that might not be easily shared in those applications directly.

Sites that review products and services are growing in popularity. Although most consider Amazon.com merely an online shopping mall, every product it sells is accompanied by consumer reviews that are influential to online shoppers. Sites such as TripAdvisor and UrbanSpoon review hotels and restaurants. Angie’s list, Yelp, Dr. Oogle, and Google Places provide venues for reviews about professionals such as doctors and lawyers. Reviews by former patients carry much weight when viewed by prospective patients.

**SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW PATIENTS**

The ultimate purpose of our social media campaigns is to bring new patients to our practices. This happens in two ways. First, social media can directly attract new patients. Once a family realizes the need for an orthodontist, the concepts of collaboration and inbound marketing come into play. Whether the family finds our practices via referrals or on their own, today’s patients want to know more about us and the experiences of others in our offices. Even if a new patient receives a referral from his or her dentist or a friend, it is common for that person to go online to see whether there are any recommendations or complaints from former patients.

The second way that social media can attract new patients is by increasing the understanding and loyalty of current patients. Regular interaction, contests, and informational posts help to keep our current patients and their families “on board” when it comes to recommending future treatment for their families and friends. Social media sites also give our current patients a place to post testimonials and reviews that help to attract new patients.

Although the influence of the traditional web is waning as more users turn to applications on their mobile devices, the hub of your entire online presence will still be your main practice website. It is here that you can...
best provide information about yourself and your practice for prospective patients. Therefore, before kicking off any new social media effort, make sure that your current website is up to date and social media friendly. Place prominent links to your social media sites so that visitors and patients will go there to read your reviews, write their own reviews, or just participate in your social media campaign. Conversely, link all of your social media sites back to your main website, where visitors can find the information they need to contact your office and become new patients. Although we do not have room to elaborate here, improving your main website also includes implementing the before-mentioned SEO techniques so that it can easily be found by Internet search engines. A beautiful website is worthless if potential patients cannot find it.

FIVE SOCIAL MEDIA SITES FOR ORTHODONTIC PRACTICES

Since there are hundreds of social media services on the Internet, where should we begin? Developing and maintaining a successful online presence requires time and effort, so we want to limit our effort to a few of the best services. To help you get started, I have selected five that I believe will give you the best return for your time investment. A case could be made for a different order or five different sites altogether, but as of 2011 here are my recommendations.

Twitter

Twitter is my choice for the fifth best social media site for your orthodontic practice; it is a microblogging site. Think of Twitter as a way to text message all of your patients at the exactly the same time.

One major advantage of Twitter is that it is quick and easy to use. Twitter users love this venue because it is succinct (140-character limit) and well suited for use on a mobile phone. The service is free and easy to set up. Websites associated with active Twitter accounts also fare better in Google searches (SEO). Google assumes that a website associated with a 2000-follower Twitter account has more relevancy than a site with only 20 followers.

The biggest weakness for Twitter is that only 10% of Americans have Twitter accounts, and it is estimated that less than 3% actually use them. Another weakness of Twitter is that the 140-character limit does not allow much content (although this can be overcome in several ways).

The Twitter platform provides an additional way of communicating with your current patients. Some ideas for useful Tweets include announcements about available appointments, practice events, contests, and bad weather. Using Twitter successfully in this manner requires that your patients are aware of the service. This can be promoted at patient registration, on all practice correspondence, with a link on your website, and with specific Twitter registration contests or promotions.

Users of Twitter expect frequent updates from the people whom they follow. If you begin a campaign and then fail to keep it up to date, your followers will lose confidence and will not use the service as you would like. On the other hand, if you or a staff member gets carried away with tweeting, it can become a drain on your time. Because of the small percentage of your patients who are actually using Twitter regularly, it should only be used as an adjunct to a much larger social media campaign.

YouTube

YouTube is my choice for the fourth best social media site for your orthodontic practice. YouTube is a video-sharing site that is now owned by Google.

YouTube is huge. More than 13 million hours of video were uploaded in 2010, and 48 hours are uploaded every minute. Over 3 billion videos are viewed each day. YouTube is free and easy to set up. Making videos with today’s video cameras and uploading them to your “channel” can easily be done by any of your current staff. YouTube’s integrated search engine is used more than any other on the web except Google, and your video content can provide information that could lead prospective patients to your practice.

YouTube’s greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. With such an enormous number of videos available on YouTube, getting yours found by prospective patients in your community is difficult. As with website SEO, selecting the best key words and appropriate descriptions is important in helping the right people find your content. YouTube can perform two important functions in your social media campaign. First, it can provide searchable content that can attract new patients directly to your practice. Your instructional videos might come up in searches by prospective patients. Fun videos of practice events might also pull new patients your way. Second, YouTube can serve as a video “server” or hub for your main website, Facebook, Twitter, blog posts, e-mails, and other practice correspondence.

Patient privacy laws (HIPAA) are easily violated by practices that innocently post videos of their patients without their consent. Practices should also be careful to make sure that the content they post on their site is legal and that they have obtained appropriate consent to post videos showing any patients.


Practice blog

A practice blog is my choice for the third best social media service for your orthodontic practice. A blog is a chronologic journal or log of content that is of interest to your current and prospective patients.

Search engines love new content. Google’s search algorithm has two major objectives: 1) return the most relevant search result, and 2) block as many irrelevant results as possible. Google considers a dynamic, constantly updated website to be more relevant than one that went online a year ago and has not been updated since. Properly configured, each new blog post is seen by Google as updated content, and your site will gain credibility in search results.

Unlike other easy-to-use web-based social media services, an onsite blog will require setup expertise (with the associated costs). Configured incorrectly, your blogging effort will only benefit the credibility of the site hosting your blog. Additionally, a well-done blog requires much time and effort. Topics must be selected that will be of interest to patients and written in language that they can understand.

In addition to the search engine optimization credit that you will accumulate by systematically adding new content to your site, blogging provides useful content for your current and prospective patients. It gives you a venue to explain your treatment philosophies and “park” answers to frequently asked questions. In time, the volume and scope of your online content will make you an expert in the eyes of those who read your posts.

As with YouTube, you must be vigilant about the content that you post on your blog. Make sure that it is original or that you give credit to the original authors if you are using their work.

Facebook

My recommendation for the second best media site is the social-network giant Facebook. Facebook is an online community of family, friends, coworkers, fellow churchgoers, former classmates, and almost every other type of relationship that you can imagine. When people think of social media, they think of Facebook.

An old marketing slogan says “fish where the fish are.” Facebook is where the fish are! Facebook is far and away the biggest and most popular social media site in the world. As of August 2011, there were an estimated 750 million users worldwide, 50% of whom log on daily. It has been estimated that 65% of our patients have Facebook accounts. Facebook is easy to use and has tools that make promoting an orthodontic practice simple. It provides a place to post information about the practice, events, pictures, and videos. Business pages are easy to set up and manage, and they can be linked back to your main website.

There are few downsides to Facebook. One issue, however, is that Facebook users do not want to be interrupted by solicitations while they are socializing (outbound marketing). Practices need to be careful not to be blatant in their marketing campaign in either content or frequency of posts. Facebook is a community of friends who did not join to be inundated with sales pitches. Appropriate posts should provide interesting content and be relationship builders (inbound marketing). Practices that get too aggressive will see the number of users who “like” their practice start to shrink if posts are too frequent or are just obvious solicitations.

A Facebook presence for your practice allows you to interact and become friendlier with your patients. It is a chance for them to stay informed about things happening at the office between visits. It is also a chance for you to congratulate patients when you catch them doing something right. Like all social media, you can use this venue to enhance relationships between you and your patients and solidify their loyalty to your practice.

The biggest threat posed by Facebook or any social media network is the loss of privacy. Depending upon how you set your privacy preferences, your “friends” will learn things about you. Every consultant who speaks about Facebook has a different opinion about how much information should be shared and with whom. Some encourage accepting all patients and parents as friends. Others are adamantly against it. This is a matter of personal preference. Regardless of which side you support, just remember that whatever you post can end up all over the Internet. Never share or post something you wouldn’t want to be posted on the wall of your office.

Other Facebook threats have to do with your staff. Before implementing a Facebook site in your office, be sure to have a Facebook policy in place for your practice. Social networking can be addictive. There should be specific policies about whether staff members can access their personal accounts from the office or during work hours. There should be specific instructions about HIPAA and slandering patients, coworkers, the doctor, or the practice on their personal pages.

Google Places

If the largest social media service in the world only comes in as number two in my countdown, what could possibly be number one? The answer is Google Places, which is a directory of profiles automatically created by Google for every business that has a physical address or phone number. Places listings are included in the
results when users do a search that includes a physical location, region, or phone number (a local search). After it has been created, it is up to the business owner to “verify” his Places listing, edit the automatically created content, and add additional information that will be useful to visitors.

Unlike Facebook, Twitter, and most other social media sites, patients do not have to be your friends or have an account to see your Places listing. It pops up when anyone searches for your office. Once verified and edited, your Places listing has a wealth of information that complements your practice website and Facebook profile. There are pictures, videos, your logo, maps, directions to your office, links to your website, and descriptions of the products and services you offer. Google Places qualifies as social media because one of the most prominent features is the inclusion of reviews from customers (patients).

Although you can do many things to improve your Places listings’ position in a local search, there are some things you cannot change. One is distance to your “city center.” A practice located closer to the physical center of town will search higher than one farther away.9,10 Another weakness is that Google favors the Places listings of practices actually located in the searched municipality. So, although your practice might be located just over the border of a city where most of your patients reside, Google will give preference to practices with addresses actually located in that city. Lastly, Google sometimes creates multiple Places listings for the same business. This is a problem because reviews, citations, and other SEO factors are then diluted between the multiple listings. If you discover that you have several listings for your business, you should take steps to merge them into one.

Your Google Places listing gives your practice yet another opportunity to be found by prospective patients. The information on your Places listing can distinguish you from other practices in your area. Additionally, patients who are happy with you can share their experiences with potential patients right there in the results of their Google search. Positive reviews are what social media are all about, and the reviews on Google Places are front and center.

Unfortunately, Google Places posts bad reviews along with the good ones. These reviews can come from anyone, including disgruntled patients, employees, or competitors. Because anyone with an e-mail account can create a Google account (whether or not they’ve actually been a patient), fake reviews are also possible. For this reason, practices must verify and monitor their Places listing so that they are aware of what is being said about them.

GETTING STARTED

As with any other new office procedure, developing a successful social media campaign will require planning and effort. Start by updating your current website so that it is easy to find and has links to and from all of your social media sites. Verify your Google Places listing and check it for accuracy. Add additional information such as pictures, logos, and descriptions. Set up your remaining social media profiles and link them back to your main website. Make an update calendar that includes who in your practice will be responsible for each site. YouTube and your blog should be updated at least monthly. Facebook should be updated weekly. Twitter can be updated several times each day. You should also assign one staff member to monitor the reviews that appear on your Places listing once every week.

You don’t need to have everything perfect before you start creating content. You can update your Facebook status right away and post some practice pictures. You can start jotting down ideas for topics and write some posts even before your IT people have your blog configured on your website. You probably already have some videos that you can post to your newly created YouTube channel. You can send out your first tweet in less than a minute. Don’t feel that you have to do it all yourself. Assign staff members to take pictures and videos. Consider hiring technologically savvy patients to help you. They are naturals!

Finally, get the word out. After you’ve got your sites all up and have started creating content, let your patients know. Incorporate social media icons into your website, blog, practice correspondence, and marketing. Use one form of social media to promote another (ie, announce your latest blog post on Twitter and Facebook). Set up a kiosk computer in your reception area to encourage parents to “like” you on Facebook or “follow” on Twitter while they’re still in the office.

CONCLUSIONS

Social media is already affecting our practices whether or not we choose to participate. Patients are talking about us. They always have. Now they just have a more efficient way of doing so via the Internet. Incorporating social media into your current marketing campaign will allow you to participate in the discussion and will eventually mean more patients for your practice.

REFERENCES


