



# ENHANCING THE ONLINE PRESENCE OF A DENTAL PRACTICE

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This article describes methods for enhancing the online presence of a dental practice to gain market share and facilitate communication with current and prospective patients. Topics discussed include creation of a website that will help patients easily locate the practice. The importance of back links and embedded keywords is stressed. A method for identifying competitors' online marketing strategies also is presented, along with discussions of patient reviews and pay-per-click advertising options. (J Prosthet Dent 2012;107:271-275)

Prior to the propagation of the World Wide Web, dentists met prospective patients in social settings or through referrals. In the digital age, however, many patients find health-care providers by using the internet. This article presents an overview of the online presence that contemporary dental practices need to effectively attract new patients and serve existing ones. Although a sophisticated mastery of online marketing principles and tactics may require years of study and/or expert assistance, the key concepts outlined here should enable dentists that are not yet using the internet effectively to begin planning for the future.

## Websites

Every dentist can benefit substantially from a web presence that enables prospective patients to find information about the dental practice. Currently, prospective patients are less likely to use a telephone book than they are to google, a word meaning to search the internet that has become an accepted verb in the English language. Words or phrases used commonly to locate a dental health professional include: dentist, dental pain, toothache, and emergency den-

tist 24 hour. One recent search by the author for the term "dentist" yielded 25,700,000 results in 0.18 seconds. Using the term "prosthodontist" generated approximately 214,000 results (less than 1% of those obtained for dentist) in 0.12 seconds.

Such searches routinely are conducted by individuals who need dental care but do not have the name or phone number of a local dentist. Instead they enter key words (along with the name of their community) into a search bar on sites such as Google or Yahoo, and the search engine finds websites that its algorithm indicates are the most relevant to the search terms. Yet, having an online presence is not enough. Professionals who lack a robust online presence will not rank highly on the lists of search results. Websites must be dynamic to appear on one of the first pages of search results. The global internet is assessed every few weeks or so by computerized crawlers that analyze all

of the online content and its associated links. Websites that consistently offer new or updated content are valued more highly than static sites. Adding a photograph or changing the written content, even slightly, will be interpreted as an update that gives the site more weight.

It is not necessary to spend a large sum of money to create a dynamic and professional website. Dentists or their staff members who have programming skills can produce their own websites using open-source website-development programs such as Joomla, the content management system; Wordpress; or Drupal. Alternatively, services such as Prosites and DDS.com sell inexpensive website templates that can readily be customized by those with only rudimentary information-technology capabilities. Some of the sources for website creation are listed in Table I. Whatever path is chosen, it is essential to be able to add content to the site often and easily.

**TABLE I.** URLs facilitating website creation

<a href="http://www.joomla.org">http://www.joomla.org</a>
<a href="http://wordpress.org">http://wordpress.org</a>
<a href="http://drupal.org">http://drupal.org</a>
<a href="http://www.prosites.com">http://www.prosites.com</a>
<a href="http://www.dds.com">http://www.dds.com</a>

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## Search-Engine Optimization (SEO)

The first page or home page of any website should contain clear and compelling words and images that provide the information sought by users visiting the site. What is less obvious is that those words and pictures alone cannot induce anyone to find and click on the site in the first place. Rather, it is the code embedded behind what is visible on the screen that instructs search-engine crawlers to consider the site relevant to a search. Collectively, this hypertext mark-up language (HTML) code and the alternative text manipulated by it (including such things as meta-tags and keywords) summarize the site's content in a way that allows search engines to determine how well the site matches any given search.

The term, search-engine optimization, or SEO has been coined to refer to the process of refining the content, seen and unseen, of a website in order to make the site rank highly in search results. This process often involves adding hidden HTML code and editing the site's visible content to include keywords and related phrases that the target audience is likely to use when making a search engine inquiry. As previously mentioned, each search engine has its own algorithm. This is a formula devised by search-engine designers to give their users the sites most relevant to the subjects being searched. Although the details of these algorithms are not made public, it is possible by trial and error to discover how best to adjust the site's content so that its cyber presence, relative to a particular subject, will be weightier.

A dentist who wants to attract patients seeking porcelain veneers must embed that term in the practice's website. It also needs to appear in the (hidden HTML) page headings. Creating a separate page featuring porcelain veneers is a way of further strengthening the association between the website and that subject. Such a page would naturally contain images of porcelain veneers, and the phrase

"porcelain veneers" can be included in the ALT Tags (used to specify alternative text when images are not able to be shown on a web site) of those images. However, search engines prefer for keywords to appear in sentences on the page and in the alternative text.

An understanding of how to view the HTML code and alternative text on any website can enable dentists to improve the way their websites rank in the search results against those of direct competitors. For example, as mentioned earlier, a Google search for "dentists" and one's particular city or community, will yield a list containing millions of results. After the paid advertisements at the top of each page, only 10-15 results will be listed. Those on the first page may include the best-known and most respected dentists in the community, but more often they tend to be those individuals who mastered the new marketing paradigms.

By opening one of the top-ranked results and placing one's cursor on the home page, insight into the mechanics of that mastery can be gained. This is done as follows: over the onscreen text, right-clicking on the mouse will cause a drop-down panel to appear. When the option "view page source" is selected, a new page containing a mass of jumbled text will open. This is the source code for that website page. It can be copied (by pressing Control A and then Control C for PC users, or Command A and then Command C for Mac users) and the text can be pasted (Control V or Command V) into a new document in a word processor. Comparison of that document with the similarly obtained source code of one's own website can reveal ways to move one's own website up among the front runners in the search engine results. Comparisons can be conducted on the results of searching for myriad additional phrases (such as dentist veneers, and dentist crowns)

## Links

Links are online addresses that are activated when clicked, either opening

a new window on the user's computer or taking the user from the page containing the link to a different website. They are considered "inbound" when they bring web users into one's website and "outbound" when they direct users of one's website to other internet sites. Another technique for promoting one's site is to slowly increase the number of both types of links.

Search engines appear to accord importance to websites that include many links connecting to other sites. Moreover, many types of links can be added to the dental practice's website to make the site more useful and interesting to visitors. However, when adding links to one's website (accomplished through HTML markup), it is crucial to choose the option that is always offered of opening the linked site in a new window or tab. Otherwise a visitor who clicks on the link will be taken away from the initial, referring site and may never return.

Even more important than outbound links are inbound ones, since they are considered by search engines to be an indication that a given website is trustworthy and contains good content. Getting related websites to post links to one's website is thus generally an excellent strategy. One caveat is that if 2 professional websites link to each other, the value of the link may be cancelled. A certain danger also exists where a website containing many links may be pejoratively identified as a link farm, a status that may result in the site's web presence being reduced or tagged and pulled from search-engine selection.

To avoid this, one strategy is for mutually supportive professionals who are willing to add links to each other's sites is to divide themselves into 3 groups, with those in group A referring to group B, those in group B referring to group C, and those in group C referring back to group A. This triangulation technique, known as link wheeling, can work well. However, such links must be added slowly, rather than all at once. Again this underscores the need for creating a dynam-

ic website that can be updated easily and frequently. A strategy also should be developed for routinely evaluating the effectiveness of all links. Those that become inactive or transfer users to an erroneous site should be removed.

It must be stressed that different strategies are required to optimize the ranking of one's website on different search engines. Consider the author's experience with optimizing his website for the Bing search engine that comes standard on Microsoft personal computers. Technically savvy users typically prefer other search engines to Bing, which is more likely to be used by older computer users. But such users are the segment of the population that tends to need and can most likely afford more complex dentistry. The author's initial search for his web presence on Bing conducted around March of 2011 produced no results for "West Hollywood dentists." However, use of the bingle.nu website, which allows for search results from 2 sites to be directly compared, revealed that references to the Yellow Pages review site were strongly associated with sites displayed on the first page on Bing. This indicates that the length of time one has a Yellow Pages account and the number of one's reviews on it are part of the data analyzed and given weight within the Bing algorithm. The author added the dental practice website to Yellow Pages, and as reviews began appearing, the practice website's ranking on Bing rose steadily. Within a month, it had moved to the first page of search results.

Once a website has been established, another way of assessing its effectiveness is to use one of many site-analyzing services. For example, the Hubspot internet marketing company offers a free online website grader that ranks websites based on their effectiveness at showing up in searches and generating traffic (Table II). Obtaining a website grade from Hubspot also links the user to notices about regular webinars and other free services that can serve as essential reminders to consistently review the

**TABLE II.** URLs offering website analysis, guidelines, and advice

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<a href="http://www.hubspot.com">http://www.hubspot.com</a>
<a href="http://websitegrader.com">http://websitegrader.com</a>
<a href="http://www.google.com/support/webmasters">http://www.google.com/support/webmasters</a>
<a href="http://www.thevisibledentist.com">http://www.thevisibledentist.com</a>

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**TABLE III.** URLs for review sites

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<a href="http://www.yelp.com">http://www.yelp.com</a>
<a href="http://www.google.com">http://www.google.com</a>
<a href="http://www.citysearch.com">http://www.citysearch.com</a>
<a href="http://www.insiderpages.com">http://www.insiderpages.com</a>
<a href="http://www.hotfrog.com">http://www.hotfrog.com</a>
<a href="http://www.merchantcircle.com">http://www.merchantcircle.com</a>
<a href="http://www.yellowbook.com">http://www.yellowbook.com</a>
<a href="http://www.judysbook.com">http://www.judysbook.com</a>
<a href="http://www.yellowpages.com">http://www.yellowpages.com</a>

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website's performance and direct attention to increasing its ranking.

For owners of new websites, the question might arise as to whether greater success could be attained by creating additional websites under different domain names (all ultimately pointing users to the same provider). While this can be a successful mechanism for drawing more traffic, guidelines on Google's "webmaster central" site (Table II) unambiguously advise against this strategy.

### Patient Reviews

As important as it is to have a website and ensure that it ranks highly in searches for dental services, word-of-mouth remains crucial for attracting new patients. However, the means of spreading the word about products and services have evolved dramatically. Review sites such as Yelp (Table II) enable users to type a word or phrase on their computers and/or smart phones and instantly obtain access to others' opinions about their experience with the service provider. Besides persuading searchers to call and make an appointment, such reviews add weight to the practice's cyber presence and thus help boost their search engine ranking.

Having bona fide favorable online reviews is critical, and many review sites take pains to protect their reputations as reliable sources for fair evaluations of local businesses. Yelp, for example, examines its reviews for possible rule infractions. If it determines that reviews are being written deliberately to enhance an individual's stature, Yelp will cull them.

In addition to being genuine, the reviews by patients ideally should include certain types of content. Reviews should have a title, one that contains such critical information as the service provided, the word "dentist," the region where the practice is located, and an attention-getting tag. Keywords that are being used to promote the practice's website should be incorporated. The body of the review ideally should contain believable anecdotal information that supports the title.

Many websites provide dentists with the opportunity to get such reviews. These include Yelp, Google, CitySearch, Insider Pages, HotFrog, Merchant Circle, YellowBook, Judy's Book, and the Yellow Pages On Line (Table III). Signing up for a presence on these sites is free, though there may be a delay as the account data is verified. A complete profile should be created, including photographs and

information about the dental services provided. Patients then should be directly asked to post reviews on the sites of their choice and instructed how to help boost the practice to the top of search findings.

Once a practice's website is established, and reviews are posted on various sites, this marks only the beginning of the online marketing process. Review sites should be examined frequently, and conversational acknowledgments should be written in the comments sections to demonstrate concern and appreciation for the time taken and consideration given to writing the review. Patients can be asked to modify their review by adding elements such as a title and specific details.

Dentists must consider that the review process is a double-edged sword; some negative reviews are certain to appear. When they do, a response to the criticism should be posted promptly, with any misinformation corrected. If the review contravenes the review site's regulations, it may be possible to request that it be removed. The dentist may wish to speak directly with the critical patient and request that the patient revise or remove the review. Alternatively, the best response to a negative review may simply be to work harder at soliciting positive feedback that will bury it.

### Social Networking /Cyber Weight

Much has been made of the importance of Facebook and Twitter as powerful social networking and marketing tools. While most dentists will have to work hard to use these tools effectively, that is no reason not to try. A good source of information can be found at "The Visible Dentist" website (Table II).

Those who do develop expertise at using the new social-media tools can expect to benefit in several ways. Such sites provide an opportunity to converse with others about one's current interests and activities. They also build one's presence in cyberspace. Connecting one's website to accounts such as Facebook and Twitter or cre-

ating a Facebook Fan Page, which is effectively a mini-website pointing to one's principal website creates more data that the search engines can evaluate when selecting results for requested keywords. The importance of a blog should not be underestimated either. Like Facebook and Twitter accounts, blogs cost nothing to establish. While adding regular posts to any blog does require time and attention, setting up and contributing to one increases one's familiarity with how the internet works. In addition, social media can enable cultivation of a large group of people who are interested in following one's comments. By commanding their attention, even briefly, marketing efforts can be directed to them.

### Pay-Per-Click

The internet marketing techniques discussed thus far all have involved at-

tracting prospective patients to one's website organically, that is, by working to enhance the site's visibility to search engines that charge nothing for bringing sites to web-surfers' attention. However, another alternative exists. So-called target paid listings, also known as pay-per-click, allow website promoters to pay fees in order to get ahead of competitors who are also seeking to be listed high among online search results. This is advertising in the new paradigm: essentially renting real estate on the front page of the search-engine results.

To better understand how it works, consider the following analysis of public searches related to dentistry in the Los Angeles area during a recent one-month period. The pay-for-click company Leadpros.com found that users on all search sites sought information about 546 dental-related keywords during that period. Table

**TABLE IV.** Edited list with selections from 546 dental-related keywords searched for in one month in Los Angeles

Keyword	Estimated Avg. CPC	Local Monthly Searches
ca dentist	\$4.94	49,500
cosmetic dental office	\$5.17	74,000
cosmetic dental treatment	\$3.92	165,000
cosmetic dentistry	\$7.60	74,000
cosmetics dentistry	\$3.71	74,000
dentist cosmetic dentist	\$0.05	165,000
dentists cosmetic dentistry	\$0.05	74,000
dentists emergency dental services	\$0.05	22,200
emergency dental treatment	\$5.27	22,200
find a dentists	\$3.69	40,500
locate a dentist	\$3.37	22,200
los angeles dentistry	\$14.43	12,100
school for dentistry	\$1.90	49,500
symptom of tmj	\$0.05	27,100
tmj and treatment	\$1.33	18,100
tmj therapy	\$1.11	18,100
tmj treatment	\$1.46	18,100
tmj treatments	\$1.75	18,100
tooth whitening dentist	\$7.99	165,000

CPC - Cost Per Click

Source: Ken Ross of pay-per-click vendor Leadpros.com.

IV shows a small fraction of these keywords, along with the number of times (rounded off) they were entered during the month in question. The extensive number of searches, literally hundreds of thousands, is immediately apparent. Moreover the middle column displays the charge per click to have one's website and information appear at the top of the list (typically in an on-screen area demarcated for advertising) whenever someone enters those key words.

Pay-for-click advertisers only are charged when someone clicks on their link. The price they pay results from a constant bidding war among dentists seeking to attract the attention of people searching on those terms. Table IV shows that some practices were willing to pay as high as much as \$7.99, for example, every time a visitor seeking a "tooth whitening dentist" came to their website. Dentists at the top of these bidding wars decide how much they want to spend each month on advertising, and their URLs appear at the top of the list until enough people have clicked on their

sites to use up the budget allocated. Then others will be posted. Each one of the key words can be selected by any dentist; decisions must thus be made about which words best relate to one's favored focus for practice growth.

By fielding the calls or answering the e-mails from respondents, the staff of pay-for-click advertisers must convert those inquiries into appointments for treatment. If staff and office facilities are unprepared to do that effectively, this type of marketing program will be a waste of money. In addition, while dental advertising in any form traditionally has been considered unprofessional or even unethical, as Table III reveals, standards are in flux, and many dentists clearly are choosing to build their businesses in this manner.

**SUMMARY**

This article explained why dentists must be computer-literate and own dynamic and effective websites. The mechanism by which embedded text can optimize the likelihood that

matching key words will draw users to a site was examined, along with the importance of both inbound and outbound links and online reviews by patients. Methods for protecting the dental practice from online slander and triangulating links to prevent cancellation of value were described. Additionally, pay-per-click options which use key words to derive revenue for the search-engine hosts were discussed.

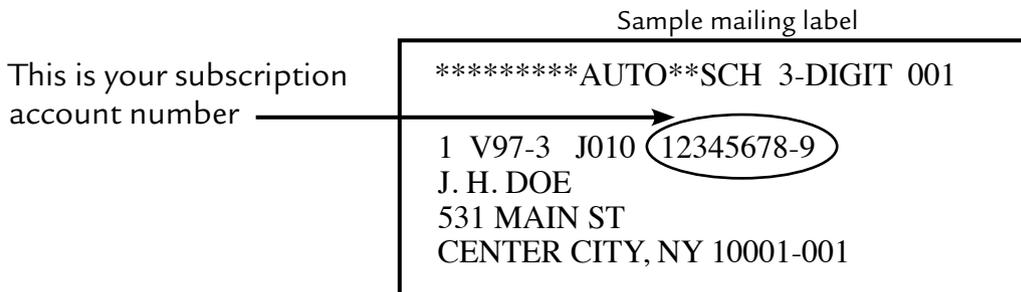
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