GETTING KEY ELEMENTS INTO YOUR WEBSITE

By Amy Morgan, CEO of Pride Institute

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If a dental practice wants to be well known and well thought of, then it is vital to have a real marketing strategy that creates awareness and conversion. At Pride Institute, our favorite definition of marketing is "an on-going process of connecting with people who appreciate your products and services". The word process stands out because it implies much more than a one-off event. It's a series of interactions that attracts prospects, persuades them to want your services and converts their interest into an appointment. If the dentist and team are not getting the number of new patients that they are hoping for, then one or more of the marketing interactions are not effective.

One of the best tools to implement your multi-faceted marketing strategy is your practice website. Online accessibility is an essential element in the process of connecting with prospects who are accustomed to getting information at the click of a mouse. Recent surveys show that 66% of all medical/dental prospects use websites encountered in search results as their primary decision driver when choosing a healthcare provider.

The Pew Research Center reports that in 2009, 8 out of 10 Internet users searched online for health information. That means that the tsunami of online communication isn't headed toward the dental community, it's already upon us! Even if the majority of your new patients are referred, they may still seek information from your website to confirm their decision to engage with your practice.

Dental websites can have two primary purposes:
1) To create awareness for potential new patients and convert that awareness into a "call to action" (for example, the first appointment)

2) To engage your patients of record and your specialists in an interactive online community (referred to as "Web 2.0") which reinforces value, commitment, and long-term loyalty and growth

Your website is your best opportunity to communicate your brand – your unique selling proposition that inspires and engages. So let's review the key elements that make this vital tool reach beyond a cookie-cutter template and drive engaged patients through your door.

Element #1: Branding

If you know what your brand is (a promise to your community that you never break), then every aspect of your website should consistently communicate that brand. The colors, logo, testimonials, pictures and "meet the dentists and team" page should all highlight what makes you unique. If your target demographic is mature adults who are interested in both functional and cosmetic dentistry, then every aspect of your website must be appealing to that profile. No matter what your brand, all content must be patient-focused and appealing to women. Why? Because marketing research suggests they make the majority of healthcare decisions for their families. The good news is women-friendly content can also appeal to your male patients. For example, instead of just listing your team's credentials, start with your bios and what you love about dentistry: "In the 22 years I have been in practice as a dentist, I am most proud of the relationships I have with my patients and their commitment to a lifetime of oral health. Each day I am excited to deliver the very best clinical results in an environment that exceeds expectations."

Element#2: Information Design

Your website captures the attention of prospects and patients of record at the very moment they desire specific information about your practice. The key to success is making sure the information they are looking for is easy to find, user-friendly and inspiring. When designing your website you must start by answering this question: "What are website visitors looking for when they get to my web page?" Whatever they are thinking about or hoping to find, it is vital that they find their answers – their "WIIFM" (what's in it for me) – quickly and simply. Once you can answer that question, then you have to decide how to fashion your conversion message, which is the call to action that takes your website visitors to the next step.

There is something called the 1.54/5.0 second rule that is essential to understand if you are going to capitalize on your website traffic (see The Social Media Bible by Lon Safko and David Brake). Studies show that the average web page visitor will spend 1.54 seconds to decide if your website satisfies the WIIFM test and if there is a need to explore further. Once you get over that hurdle, visitors will spend an additional 5.0 seconds to decide how much more time they are willing to spend on your site to get the additional information necessary to make a next-step decision. So you don't have much time to educate patients or generate new levels of commitment. You need to think about listing your benefits like headlines in a newspaper – designed to attract immediate attention and value. For example, "Welcome to the office of…We believe that everyone deserves a healthy, beautiful smile."

Element #3: Interaction

If your website is interactive – if it invites patients to engage with your practice through activities such as feedback, chats, referrals, online appointing and bill paying – your website will be more successful.

"It's your website where you get the chance to fully express, sell, persuade and show prospective customers every facet of your business skill, ability and talent. To show everyone how alive, capable, knowledgeable, experienced and active your business is."

~Michael Guilfoyle

Your website should be able to:

- Schedule and confirm appointments

- Provide easy-to-use online forms for patient registration, health/dental history, etc.

- View account history, monitor insurance payments and make payments online

- View office guidelines, office location, directions, hours of operation, etc.

- Link to the doctors to whom you refer patients

- Provide post-op instructions

- Display patient feedback and real testimonials

- Communicate the benefits of your practice's services (not a laundry list of procedures)

- Provide access to treatment plans and patient education tools like Henry Schein GURU and digital x-rays to educate individual patients

- Invite patients to refer others

- Create a community through social media outlets like Facebook, YouTube, etc.

Every time there is a reason for your patients of record to log onto your website, you exponentially increase customized communication that reinforces their loyalty, commitment and relationship with your practice. By providing simple, user-friendly options for appointing, bill paying etc. you are also increasing the value of your patients' experience with your dental practice. There is no doubt that online systems directly and positively impact the productivity and efficiency of your practice. In this hectic world, people are looking to cut the extra steps out of any and all processes, to preserve the all important resource – time. A recent survey stated that 81% of all patients would prefer to pay their bills online. This is just one example of how your website can truly enhance the patient experience and create more efficient systems for the dentist and team as well.

Element #4: Search Engine Optimization

Your website must be designed so prospects find it at the top of the list when they use online search tools like Google, Bing, and Yahoo. This process is called "search engine optimization" (SEO). Think of these search engines as if they were influential people. You want them to like your website and be willing to tell others about it.

The first step is to ask this question: "Who shows up when I search for words related to my brand?" If you are not in the top three listings, it's time to learn how to woo the search engine! There are many different ways to achieve a higher search engine ranking. Here are a few of the key methods:

1. Keywords: Each individual page of your website must be analyzed for its own keywords that will be attractive to SEO.

2. Page Titles: Open up each page of your website and look at the title bar. Make sure the title includes the most important key words for the page.

3. Build reputable, external links: Having external links, links on other websites that link to your site, makes your site appear more important to search engines. For example, placing dental education videos on YouTube and listing your practice in membership lists for organizations like the AGD or the ADA qualify as reputable links.

Consult with experts on an on-going basis when looking for ways to improve your website's SEO. This is a new frontier and the rules change constantly.

In today's dental practice, your website plays an important role in attracting and maintaining patients, who are inspired to accept treatment, refer friends and family and take responsibility for their long-term oral health. With a strong foundation, built upon the basic fundamentals of website marketing and E-success, every practice can and should realize a huge return on investment. It's not too late to catch the wave!