

# The SOCIAL MEDIA

## BUFFET



▶ *How to effectively engage  
with your patients online*



by Heather Frechette-Crowley



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**C**reating a social media presence for your practice is a lot like visiting a breakfast buffet. There are a ton of options, some wiser than others (fresh fruit—yes; extra hollandaise sauce—not so much) and while enticing, sometimes the sheer volume of options can result in temporary paralysis. Waffles or pancakes? Sausage links or patties? Latte or cappuccino? Auuughh!

But unlike the temporary traffic jam at the omelet station, indecision when it comes to social media could have a lasting effect on your practice. On average, a person spends 118 minutes a day on social media.<sup>1</sup> If your practice isn't there, you're missing a direct path to current and prospective patients. So, loosen your belt and pull your chair up to the table.

### Picking the right meal

So how do you know which social media platforms your patients use? Here's a hint—if your patients are people, Facebook is a good place to start. Given that Facebook has 1.79 billion monthly active users,<sup>2</sup> it's a safe bet that your patients use it daily.

Effective use of social media creates an ongoing conversation with current and prospective patients, so use the same tactics that you would to create a great in-person conversation. Ask questions, share interesting information, and maintain the flow with responses. Essentially, be engaging.

Question posts get 100 percent more comments than standard text-based posts,<sup>3</sup> so don't be shy with your requests. Create opportunities for your followers to be involved. Try a Facebook poll that asks

At first you may be tempted to try every social media platform at once, from Facebook and Twitter to YouTube and Instagram. Don't. A better approach is to start with the one or two platforms that will give you the most exposure. It's much safer to branch out to additional platforms when you're ready than it is to let sporadic posts die a slow death online.

followers to vote on Halloween costumes for the staff. Redecorating the lobby? Let your online community weigh in on paint colors or waiting room magazines. Whatever the topic, remember to close the loop with your followers once the decision has been made (e.g., "Thanks for voting! This Halloween the #YourPracticeName team will be dressed as characters from Disney's *Frozen*. Brrr!")



Involving patients in your practice's charitable giving is another way to bring patient engagement to a new level. People like to give, and when you make it easy, it's a win-win. For example, commit to donating to a local charity when you reach a certain number of likes on Facebook (depending on your practice, 100–250 may be a good place to start), and encourage your followers to make it happen. Another way to involve patients in giving is to donate to a breast cancer awareness charity for each patient who posts a selfie wearing pink in the dental chair and tags your practice during the month of October. To increase the camaraderie, be sure to post photos of you and your staff participating as well.

### Maximizing your benefits

While goodwill is great, don't be afraid to provide a little incentive. In fact, an industry report<sup>4</sup> revealed that 35 percent of Facebook users liked a page so they could participate in contests. Use this to your advantage by including chances to win in your social media strategy.

There are two ways you can run a contest on Facebook, either directly on your timeline or by using a third-party contest app. Timeline contests are quick and easy to launch. To get started, post a status update on your page detailing the contest criteria and have participants "like" or comment to enter. Don't forget to "pin" your post to keep it at the top of your page.

Timeline contests deliver quick page engagement and make participation easy. One potential challenge with this method is selecting a winner. If your contest garners 20 responses, you can easily execute it on your own. However, if you generate hundreds of likes, choosing a winner in an unbiased way becomes more difficult. This is where an app, such as Woobox, can help. These apps automate the random selection process, taking it completely

off your plate. Just don't forget to follow Facebook's policies.

Using a third-party contest app for all aspects is also an option. For a fee, apps like WishPond, Rafflecopter, and Shortstack (just to name a few), provide a tab app which your followers access via a link or thumbnail on your page. The tab app houses all contest-related information (rules, entry form, etc.) and automates the entire process. This method is great for large, multisite practices that engage with a large online population, and/or those that want to gather participant emails for future outreach.

Generally, the longer the contest timeline, the larger the prize. For example, it would make sense for a contest giving away a weekend stay at a local B&B to be open much longer than a drawing for a three-month supply of floss. (Not that oral hygiene isn't as compelling—wink, wink.) Some timelines will be influenced by the contest topic—you wouldn't ask patients to choose Halloween costumes after October 31—but others are more dependent on practice factors such as the number of contests you want to run in a given period.

Aside from their opinions, what do people most love to share on social media? Pictures—of themselves, their kids, their pets, their lunch—essentially everything. In fact, HubSpot reports that content with visuals garners 94 percent more views, and is 40 times more likely to be shared on social media than text alone.<sup>5</sup>

So how do you leverage this behavior to benefit your practice? Start by asking! (Novel idea, isn't it?) Post signs in your lobby and have front-desk staff ask patients to check in on social media and tag your practice. Create a selfie-station with props—think oversized teeth and signs denoting regular check-ups (#Every6Months #YourPracticeName.) To encourage participation, patients who check in and tag your practice or post selfies with #YourPracticeName can be entered into a

drawing for an electric toothbrush, movie tickets, or a gift certificate to a local restaurant. Prizes and frequency of drawings can be tailored to your budget and patient population.

Another great way to foster patient relationships and provide a photo op is to offer parents the opportunity to snap a picture of their child (or themselves) holding a special “Cavity Free” sign (which of course also includes #YourPracticeName). Remind them to tag you when they post it on social media, because you know they will.

Not only do people love to share photos on social media, but they love to be *asked* to share. Hence the popularity of those seven-day photo challenges (a.k.a. the reason your college roommate begs you to post a photo of your cat/dog/child/significant other for the next seven days). Make your request dental-related by asking patients to post pics

of their best toothy grin with the hashtags #LoveMySmile #YourPracticeName. Take it up a notch and ask followers to “like” the most unique selfie and award a prize to the patient with the most votes.

Posting seasonal requests is also a nice way to stay in front of patients year-round. Ask followers to share photos of what they’re thankful for during November and post pics of their favorite service member around the Fourth of July and Veterans Day. The key is to have your practice referenced in the posts, so be sure to include specifics on how to tag your practice (#Thankful #YourPracticeName or #WeThankYou #YourPracticeName).

### Food for thought

Engaging with patients online improves loyalty, creates more opportunity for

conversation, and provides greater patient insight. The question is no longer *should* you be social, but *how* should you be social. The ideas shared here are merely a jumping-off point. Ask your patients what they would like to see online and get your staff on board. But hurry—the omelet station is about to close. ■

#### References

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