

DIGITAL MARKETING BY THE NUMBERS

by Diana P. Friedman, MA, MBA

The dental industry has become exceedingly competitive due to a tighter economy, more educated patients and the popularity of the Internet. Prospective and existing patients often go online to make educated decisions when choosing a dental care provider.

Digital marketing is a broad term that encompasses any electronic market communications a practice presents to its existing or prospective patients in its community. This includes cornerstone channels like websites, search engine optimization (SEO), social media management and review syndication, as well as online advertising such as search engine marketing (SEM) campaigns.

Over the past decade a great deal of information has been published about digital marketing. Ironically, the abundance of information has often made it harder to determine the right strategy for your practice.

The benchmark market research study

Let's look at the findings of two benchmark research studies on digital marketing in the dental space. The objective of the studies was to understand the prevalence of each channel's utili-

zation as well as overall dental professional satisfaction levels and perception of value.

The first national market research study in April 2014 was a blind study conducted to ensure objectivity and eliminate any risk of bias.¹

The study included 512 participants, of which 82 percent were dentists and 100 percent had sole or shared responsibility for selecting technology solutions for the practice.

The other study was conducted in March 2014. This study was not blinded and the profile of participants was biased by the fact that all have activated at least one digital marketing solution with Sesame Communications. The objective of this study was to assess perception of value for the activated digital marketing solutions.

The findings

Practice websites

With the transition of marketing to the digital world, dentistry has shifted its perceptions of traditional marketing approaches and clearly recognizes the power of the Internet. This is evidenced by

the fact that 62 percent of dentists² reported that print advertising is not important to the success of their practice while 87 percent of dentists stated their website is important to the success of their practice.³ Interestingly, a research study from 2012 noted 95 percent of dentists felt their website was important to the success of the practice. The decline is perhaps due to the recognition on the part of dentists that a website alone is not sufficient. In order to be successful, a comprehensive online strategy with the practice website as the foundation is required.

Of dentists with websites, a significant 76 percent had a degree of satisfaction with their websites.⁴ This is a positive finding, demonstrating the quality of websites improving over the past years as well as that dentists have advanced up the learning curve and are more discerning about their website requirements.

An interesting finding was the low level of loyalty on the part of dental professionals to the developer and host of their current practice website. A significant 19 percent stated they would likely select a new provider for their future website project with 42 percent being neutral.⁵ Considering that dentists tend to be brand loyal, this may suggest one of three things:

- Working with their web developer was challenging
- The final practice website did not meet expectations
- The ongoing support from their web developer was poor

Search engine optimization (SEO)

SEO services target the prominence of a practice website's ranking in online searches. Considering 75 percent of users never scroll past the first page of results, this is a very significant service.⁶ The study found that 53 percent⁷ of practices with an active website have activated an SEO service — clear evidence that the dental industry has embraced SEO.

Interestingly, 37 percent of participants noted they were not satisfied with their SEO service.⁸ There are two likely reasons for this. First, the industry has not done a great job establishing the ROI and value proposition for SEO. Second, dentists likely were led to believe they would rank first across all relevant search terms, setting unrealistic expectations and unfulfilled promises.

Social media

Social media involves the active management of practice-branded channels of communication with existing and prospective patients and the local community. At minimum the strategy involves an active Facebook page, YouTube channel, blog and LinkedIn profile for the dentist(s) and practice.

The study found that 55 percent of practices have an active social media channel.⁹ The challenge is the measurement of the tangible effect and value of social media on practice performance. While some impact elements are easy to measure (e.g., new patients contacting the practice as a result of online social media engagement), others are more challenging. For instance, the quantifiable value and benefit of

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Fig. 1: Switching intent for future website development n=363

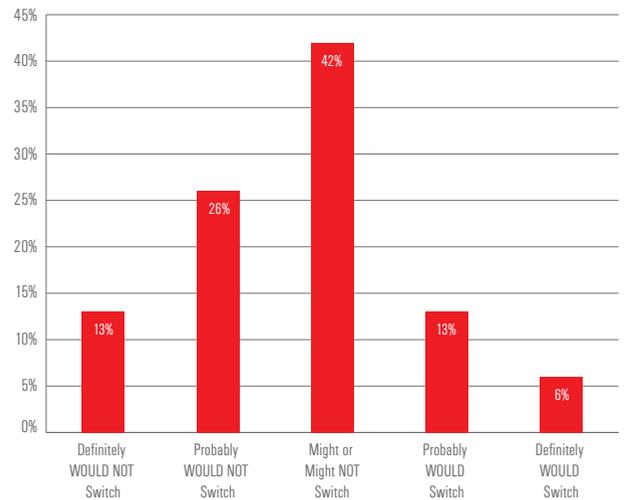
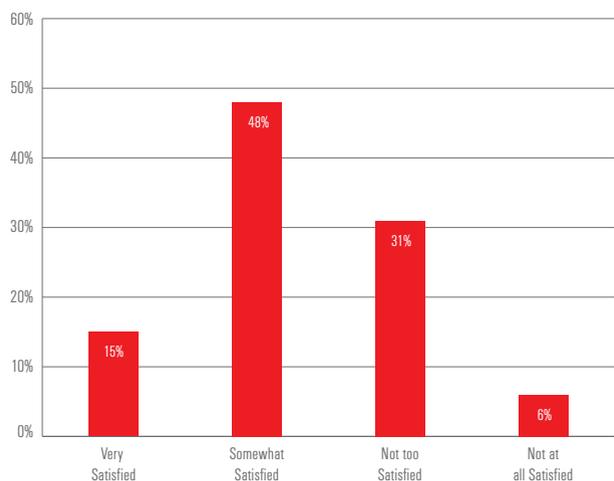


Fig 2: Satisfaction with SEO n=297



keeping the patient base active and engaged with the practice. The assumption this will lead to a stronger recare system and higher case acceptance through connecting the dots in these areas is a challenge.

Review syndication

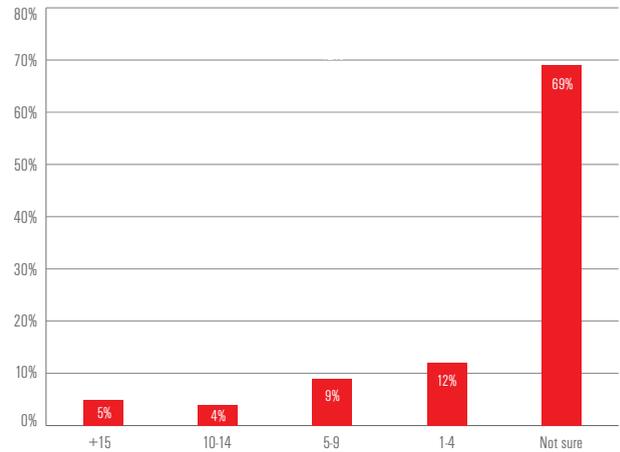
Online reviews are a critical part of an effective online marketing strategy. A practice can have an incredible website, SEO and social media presence, but unmanaged lukewarm or negative reviews can be extremely detrimental to new patient acquisition efforts.

Dentists recognize the value of reviews and many have had the unfortunate experience of finding a less-than-stellar review online. The key to dealing with negative online reviews is to not shy away from them. The best strategy to manage your online reputation is to optimize the number of patient-qualified, positive reviews from your practice. When a prospective patient finds a hundred great reviews about your practice and one or two negative ones, they will discount the negative ones and select you. By contrast, if only a handful of reviews are published, each negative one will carry greater weight.

As important as reviews are, the study found that most dentists do not know how many reviews they have online.¹⁰ Only 5 percent had more than 15 reviews online.¹¹ The research results point to a need for a more effective, proactive strategy to building your practice online reputation with positive patient reviews. The issue goes beyond the number of reviews and involves finding the optimal channel for publishing reviews. While microsites house many reviews, they rarely attract prospective patients looking for a new dental care provider. By comparison, more than 20 million consumers go to Healthgrades.com annually to schedule an appointment with a new dental care provider. A research study found that, on average, a Healthgrades Enhanced Profile drives more than 11

patient calls into the practice per month.¹² An astounding 97 percent of doctors with Healthgrades.com stated it is important to the success of their practice.¹³

Fig 3: How many reviews your practice has n=301



Final thoughts

In the digital age of dentistry, finding the right online marketing strategy can be intimidating. The data in this article provides insights into the trends in the industry. Evaluate where your practice is, then select an online marketing company that specializes in dentistry and can provide a comprehensive effective strategy to drive results for your practice. ■

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8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
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11. *Ibid.*
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13. *Sesame Member Survey, 2014, Sesame Communications*

What digital marketing tactics do you employ in your practice? Comment after this article on Dentaltown.com.

Author's Bio



Diana P. Friedman, MA, MBA, is the CEO of Sesame Communications. Sesame Communications helps dental practices harness the power of the Internet to accelerate new patient acquisition, build patient loyalty and transform the patient experience. The Sesame 24-7 Patient Engagement Management System provides an innovative and comprehensive set of solutions that help boost practice growth and profitability. For more information, visit www.sesamecommunications.com.