Word of mouth on digital steroids

Dental Tribune’s Laura Hatton looks at the pros and cons of dental practices on Facebook

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lotting quite nicely into the twenty-something age bracket, I should be stereotyped as part of the online generation, interacting via computer and visualising life as though everything was four dimensional. Having grown up in a technological blogosphere, this judgement should be right. However, even though I remain a twenty-something individual, I have recoiled from the Facebook phenomenon and remain impartial to the world it stands for.

Inundated with narcissism, Facebook has spanned the world as though it has lived a thousand lives. It has been nurtured and moulded into a popular activity of modern society and as a result, the social networking site has gone viral. Facebook is a search engine in itself (Looking for a company? Find it on Facebook) and it is itself (Looking for a company? Find it on Facebook). This meteoric rise in search queries that has given Facebook its edge. Every ounce of information that can be displayed is there, in the format of status updates, wall posts and profile pictures.

As a result, social media has become a catalyst for marketing and communication in a way that no one could have predicted.

Brand Business

Looking at the facts it can’t be disputed that Facebook is a great tool to sell a company’s brand. In 2009, 200 million people had joined Facebook and in July 2010, 500 million people had a Facebook page. Even Coca Cola, one of the biggest companies in the world, has a Facebook page and 21,907,247 liked their most recent video. However, as far as advertising is concerned, for years companies have been in control of their product and the way it is put out into the world – but now the ball is in the other court and the consumers are in control. Consumers own networking sites and so it has become imperative for companies to delve into the realm of social media; they no longer need to simply sell a product, they need to sell their story. Recognising the marketing potentials that social media holds over the world, dental practices have started shifting into the unchartered territory of Facebook. But from a dentist’s point of view, is Facebook really a good choice for marketing?

A shift in economics

Seeking a public response to this question I leapt into the role of the marketer and headed to the masses to find out what potential patients really thought about their dentist being on Facebook. Responses included that adding your dentist on Facebook wasn’t professional and that patients only want to visit the dentist when there is a problem. “Would you add your doctor on Facebook? Or like your hospital?” soon became the theme of discussions and answers generated questions, like why would a dentist want to be on Facebook? The answer came down to one possible solution: it’s not to gain friends, but to gain patients.

For people in the medical sector, Facebook is undoubtedly a great place to connect and share ideas; however, in the pursuit of gaining patients, there seems to be two quite different possible outcomes that the practice could face:

1. The dental practice could look desperate, awkward and unprofessional, especially if the photos were of the Christmas Party or days out. The ‘wall’ could be infiltrated with people who posted messages that you would rather not appear on screen etc.

2. The dental practice could look up-to-date and modern, providing a platform to share information and generate a dental presence in virtual society.

Perspective

Unable to make a conclusion so early on in my enquiries, I spoke to an expert in social media marketing for dental professionals, Rita Zamora, to try and gain some perspective as to what direction a dentist should travel in if they decide to journey down the Facebook route.

Rita discussed several options that dentists could adhere to. Firstly, she suggested that dentists should keep dental related content to a minimum and keep in mind that Facebook is fun and social. Posts could include information about donations that the practice or dentist is making and celebrations, such as anniversaries and post news about awards and achievements.

“Success can be achieved by exploring new areas of social networking, having fun, and building relationships with patients” Rita suggested, “it’s all about finding that common ground.”

Vivid Lime

Not entirely convinced I decided to seek a different perspective and spoke to Head of Digital at online advertising and marketing group Vivid Lime, Ifty Ahmed. Ifty explained to me that Facebook could in fact be used in a professional manner. He suggested that say, for example, the main objectives for a dental practice to have Facebook were to gain patients, deal with customer issues, to ‘air’ the dental practice and recruit staff - then having a Facebook page could provide a platform for achieving all these goals. However, I remained slightly scepti-
and future development. But is this really the way forward for dentists when it comes to gaining patients and pushing their practice out into the spotlight?

To answer this question I needed to consider how Facebook stands in relation to marketing.

**Word of mouth on digital steroids**

One of the basic principles of marketing is delivering your message to as many people as possible. With this in mind Facebook can be a powerful recruitment tool, and always keep in mind Facebook is the life line of all marketing and make it flourish.

Erik Qualman, the author of *Socialnomics*, wrote that social networking is like word of mouth on digital steroids and if used appropriately, social networking can be a weapon in the advertising world.

"Think of it like a garden where you have to prepare the soil and then constantly nurture the plants as they grow. You can't let it run wild otherwise you won't have the result that you want!"

**Care in communications**

And finally, going back to basics, word of mouth (in whichever form it takes) is the greatest asset to any company or practice. It is real people sharing real experiences, views and opinions. So, take care in communications — it is the life line for any practice.

Undeniably, the world has become entangled inside the web of social networking: We breathe in the blogosphere and become socially unaccountable for if we fail to become part of the “social graph”. So all in all, there does seem to be some economic potential of getting involved with social media and putting your face out into that virtual world that is rapidly entangling society. I’m just not too sure if Facebook is the right way.

As Rita outlined, social marketing is only “one tool in a box”. There is never simply just one tool to sustain practice marketing and make it flourish, and despite the hullabaloo of social media, websites continue to remain an important function of running a practice. Never forget that websites turn visitors into phone calls, and phone calls can become patients.

**References**

[1] Pg. xxii Socialnomics, Erik Qualman
[2] Pg. xxii Socialnomics, Erik Qualman
[3] Pg. xxii Socialnomics, Erik Qualman