The case for social media

In today's world, social media provides many opportunities to strengthen a dental practice. After working with successful practices, I have noticed that a common denominator is the most successful ones have usually created a community of patients who feel a connection to them. Experts often refer to this type of practice as a 'relationship practice,' where the patient feels a sense of relationship with the dentist and team members. This can be contrasted with a 'transaction practice,' where patients choose the office based on reasons like acceptance of insurance plan, location, price or convenient hours. The transaction practice tends to have less loyal patients (resulting in higher patient turnover), and in turn has a greater dependence on marketing to attract new patients. While there are many successful formats for practices, virtually everyone can benefit by developing stronger relationships. Social media provides a very useful platform to connect with and build a community of loyal patients.

There are many upsides to developing a stronger relationship and connection to your patients. Loyal patients are often more likely to keep their appointments, are more likely to accept treatment recommendations, and are more likely to refer their family, friends and co-workers to the practice. They are also more likely to make dentistry a high priority in their lives.

Patient education can be another useful function of social media activity. The reality is that many people know very little about oral health. Educating patients about the benefits of good oral health and about available treatment options can be of great benefit to your practice. When patients are informed, they are more likely to make good treatment decisions and to value and appreciate the care they receive.

Developing patient trust and confidence is the goal of all dental professionals. Social media provides a way for patients to engage with your practice between visits and can enhance the development of trust and confidence. By providing a forum for patients to engage with you between appointments, you are creating top-of-mind awareness that can be quite valuable.

This is an exciting time for the dental profession! Technology and resources allow us to connect with patients in ways that simply were not possible even just a few years ago. This paper will serve as a guide for tips on how to use social media to strengthen and build your business.
Foundation

Social media is not a thing that you have — rather it is something that you do. There are many social media channels to choose from, and the landscape is constantly changing. New channels emerge and catch the attention of the public while others fade away in use and popularity. We’ll begin by providing a guide to the most useful options, and make specific recommendations on how to use each one most effectively. It’s also important to recognize that the time your team has to manage social media is finite, so make sure to choose channels that can be managed with a modest amount of effort.

Here are the four most useful social media channels for dental practices:

BLOG

I like to think of a patient-oriented blog as the hub of your social media activity. Blog is short for ‘web log,’ and is a collection of short articles, or posts, that are published electronically. Each post should provide information and content to your reader and should be relatively short — in the range of 250-300 words — and cover a topic of consumer interest. In addition to appearing on your blog, posts can be used in a variety of ways, including:

• Published on your website
• Posted on your Facebook page
• Provided in a link form on your Twitter feed
• Emailed to patients
• Compiled together and mailed (or emailed) as a newsletter

One very important benefit of using social media is that it can enhance your online profile and improve your search ranking with Google and other search engines. While Google will not publish its algorithm, we do know that certain factors improve your ranking. One factor is the dynamic nature of your website. If your website is static and doesn’t get updated regularly, then you will quickly drop in Google search rank. By publishing your blog posts on your website, you are providing dynamic content to improve your ranking.

Including key search terms in your blog posts will also help you rank higher in search results. For example, posting an item about cosmetic dentistry will improve

the chances that a patient from your geographic area searching for cosmetic dental services will find your practice.

While you may choose any frequency to publish on your blog, maintaining a regular schedule will prove most effective. I recommend creating a new blog post every week.

Here are some potential blog post topics:

• The benefits of whitening and the whitening options available in your office
• A highlight of the specific technology available in your practice
• The foods that contribute to poor dental health
• What to do if a child has a tooth knocked out while playing sports
• The appropriate time to take a child to the dentist for their first visit
• An overview of sedation dentistry options in your practice
• How power toothbrushes can improve oral health
• The connection between oral and systemic health
• The benefits of custom sports mouthguards
• A spotlight of each member of your team

You can see that potential topics are limited only by your creative thinking. I would encourage you to brainstorm with your team members to develop a list of future topics. Another great source of inspiration is to answer the most commonly asked questions from patients. For example, if you’re often asked why fillings need to be replaced even when they don’t hurt, then other people have likely wondered about this same question, which makes it a useful blog topic!
FACEBOOK

A business Facebook page offers another great social media opportunity for dental practices. Recently, it was reported that over one billion people in the world have a Facebook account, and membership continues to grow at a rapid pace.

I recommend setting up a page and posting content to it three to four times per week. Here’s a great way to think about your Facebook interaction. For people in your community who do not already know you and who are not current patients, you want to direct them to your website — the goal is for that person to become a patient. The question becomes “where do you want existing patients to engage with your practice between scheduled appointments?” Your website really is not the most useful place for that type of interaction. However, your Facebook page is an excellent place to create ongoing patient engagement between visits.

Once you set up your page, the next step is to encourage people to ‘like’ it. By liking your page, any content you post will show up in their Facebook news feed. One way to create more likes is to let your patients know that you now have a Facebook page and encourage them to like it. Here are some other ways to build more likes:

- Set up countertop signage that lets people know you have a new Facebook page with an invitation to like it.
- Run promotions encouraging patients to like your page and offering them a small gift, like a Starbucks gift card, lip balm, sports water bottle, or reusable grocery bag or entry into a drawing for a larger prize like an iPad or a free whitening gel.
- Post a ‘like’ button on every page of your website.
- Ask team members to invite their personal Facebook friends to like your page.

Once you have a Facebook page set up and are beginning to get some likes, the next step is to encourage your patients to ‘check in’ when they are visiting your office. When a patient checks in, a notice will appear in their news feed informing all of their friends that they are visiting your practice. For example, Linda might check in to your office and write a short note, “Visiting my friends at Downtown Dental for my hygiene appointment.” This message will appear in her feed where all of her friends will see it. Later that day, Linda may be at her yoga class when one of her friends tells her she is looking for a dentist and that she noticed Linda was at Downtown Dental. This type of engagement is extremely valuable and truly extends the reach of your practice to all of your patient’s friends. In addition to simply asking patients to check in, you can also run promotions to encourage them to do so.

The primary goal of your practice Facebook page is to create patient engagement. You want to earn your patient’s mindshare and you do this by creating interesting posts. Here are four of the most useful types of posts:

1. Post with the intent of interaction — Ask patients to complete a sentence or comment. For example, “I enjoy healthy foods like ______________.”
2. Post photos and videos — People love them. Encourage patients to add their own comments, and to like and share. For example, we recently posted a photo of Dr. Nielson visiting his son’s kindergarten class for Bring Your Dad to Work Day. According to the metrics provided by Facebook in the Insights Panel, over 1,000 people saw this photo.
3. Share useful links — Suggesting valuable outside content can both help get people involved and educate patients at the same time.
4. Ask fans to share and like your posts — It’s perfectly fine to ask patients to share your posts. You don’t want to overdo this strategy, so use it selectively.

One note about responding to comments on your Facebook pages. When you post interesting and engaging content, it is very likely that patients will comment on your posts — this is exactly the result we are striving for. When patients comment on a post, it is very important that you participate in the conversation. For example, we recently posted a picture of our administrative team members and one of our patients commented that she really liked Laurie’s new hairstyle. When we saw this, Laurie quickly posted a short comment in reply. Now, this may sound like common courtesy, but it’s exactly the type of courtesy that’s often lacking in social media. Participating in these conversations is the best way to connect with your patients, and these interactions will foster future engagement.

One more potential application of Facebook is to use it to promote special offers to your patients and your community. For example, you may choose to offer a ‘Summer Whitening Special’ and promote it on your Facebook page. These promotions are an excellent way to draw attention to a particular treatment option that you offer.

TWITTER
Twitter is a microblogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based message of up to 140 characters, known popularly as ‘tweets’. Because of the character limit, the best way for a dental practice to use Twitter is to post links to content that is of particular interest to your followers. One of the most effective uses is to post links to your blog posts. Here are some other examples of useful tweets for dental professionals:

![Behner Dental](image)
Beiner Dental @BehnerDental
The tooth is the only part of the body that can’t repair itself. Take care of your teeth!
Expand

![Parshin Dental](image)
Dr. Alex Parshin @ParshinDental
Dentists work hard to eliminate tooth pain and give you that amazing smile. Be #grateful to your dentists. #Brooklyn #statenisland
Expand

![Dan Sindicar](image)
Dr. Dan Sindicar @DrDanSindicar
Oral health is an integral part in the prevention of any inflammatory disease. | ow.ly/nqaQl
Expand

YOUTUBE
YouTube is the second most popular search engine behind Google. YouTube is also owned by Google, and Google uses YouTube content in their search ranking process. The best way for a dental practice to use YouTube is to create a YouTube channel and post videos to it. The videos allow you to provide content to your viewers. Here are some examples of the types of videos you might post to your YouTube channel:

- An ‘About the Doctor’ video
- A short video tour of your office
- The different whitening options available in your practice
- A video profile of a team member
- An introduction of the sedation options available
- Short patient testimonials

The topics of your blog posts can also serve as inspiration for video content. Typically these videos are very short — one to three minutes is standard.
Return on Investment

Any marketing activity for your dental practice should provide an appropriate Return on Investment (ROI). Here are the four areas where I have seen social media activity provide an excellent ROI.

GREATER PATIENT RETENTION
Social media activity can help you keep more of your patients. Increased patient engagement results in greater loyalty and a stronger connection between the two of you.

INCREASED CASE ACCEPTANCE
One of the most profound benefits of social media is increased case acceptance. When existing or potential patients spend time on your social media channels, they become better informed and feel like they know you better — sometimes even before they ever visit your practice. This accelerates patient trust and confidence.

NEW PATIENTS
An active social media profile will result in more new patients. One of the reasons this happens is a concept called ‘social proof.’ If Linda’s friend sees that she places her trust in you for her dental care, then that friend is more likely to choose you as her dentist as well.

ADDED PRACTICE EQUITY
One element in the practice valuation formula is the number of active patients. Social media creates greater patient engagement and retention, which corresponds to greater practice equity.

How much time should be devoted to managing social media activity?

Social media activity can be managed very efficiently. While our entire team is informed about our social media initiatives, we have designed a particular person to serve as our ‘social media champion.’ This team member manages all of our activity and is responsible for the social media component of our marketing plan. Our champion spends approximately one to two hours per week on our social media activities.

I am very passionate about this topic because I have experienced the results of our social media activity in my own practice, and have also witnessed the benefits in our client offices. Engaged patients are better patients! The value of developing strong relationships with patients is another characteristic shared by thriving practices. Social media provides a wonderful opportunity to connect with your patients between visits and to help guide them to make dentistry and good oral health a higher priority.

Here’s to your success with social media!