

Attracting orthodontic patients via the Internet: A 20-year evolution



Greg Jorgensen
Rio Rancho, NM

A generation ago, attracting new patients to an orthodontic practice was often done simply by cultivating a few good referral sources. General dentists, including some who might have provided orthodontic treatment out of necessity, were generally glad to have a trusted specialist they could recommend to their patients. Although general dentists remain an important source of new patients today, many consumers now turn to the Internet for help selecting their own specialists. As orthodontists face more competition from various sources, successful clinicians will make it easy for search engines—and patients—to find their Web sites on the Internet. (*Am J Orthod Dentofacial Orthop* 2015;148:939-42)

When I graduated from my orthodontic program at the University of Iowa over 20 years ago, attracting new patients to my practice was as simple as developing good relationships with the general dentists in my community. This usually involved face-to-face visits to their practices, taking them to lunch, and giving them referral pads or business cards. Although some general dentists provided orthodontic services in their practices at that time, they represented less than 10% of the offices in my area. In fact, 3 general dentists who were providing orthodontic services to their patients expressed relief that I was opening a full-time orthodontic practice so that they wouldn't have to continue doing orthodontics any more. In those early days of my practice, referrals from general dentists represented over 80% of my starts. The other 20% came from my listing in the phone book, drive-by traffic, and referrals from my own patients. As my practice matured, the percentage of referrals from my patients began to grow.

In 2015, a significant percentage of patients are still referred by general dentists. This source of patients, however, has been declining for more than a decade.

Aggressive marketing campaigns directed at both consumers and general dentists have resulted in more patients receiving orthodontic treatment from nonspecialists than ever before. Clear plastic aligners have great appeal to patients who want straight teeth but do not want to wear braces. Advertising by the companies that fabricate these aligners has led patients to believe that most malocclusions can be corrected without braces in less time than ever before. Their massive marketing campaigns have been successful in promoting aligners as an alternative to braces, and the advertising does not differentiate between specialists and general dentists. Orthodontics, especially aligner treatment, has been commoditized, and many consumers assume that the results produced by aligners or brand-name bracket systems will be identical regardless of the doctors using them.

Aligner companies have also been aggressive in promoting their products to general dentists. Their marketing encourages general practitioners to keep their orthodontic patients "in-house" by becoming providers of clear aligners. "Certification" involves attending one continuing education course where the system is explained and the protocol for submitting cases is presented. General dentists can begin providing orthodontic treatment in their own practices immediately. It is estimated that over 80,000 general dentists in the United States have been certified as of 2015. There are currently fewer than 10,000 orthodontists in this country.

Private practice, Rio Rancho, NM.
Address correspondence to: Greg Jorgensen, 1401 Barbara Loop SE, Rio Rancho, NM 87124; e-mail, drj@gregjorgensen.com.
Submitted, September 2015; revised and accepted, October 2015.
0889-5406/\$36.00
Copyright © 2015 by the American Association of Orthodontists.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ajodo.2015.10.001>

Although some general dentists offered comprehensive orthodontics in their practices 20 years ago, the past decade has seen that number increase substantially because of the proliferation of products promoted as “short-term orthodontics.” Whereas the creators of these techniques are up-front about the limitations of their systems with the general dentists who take their courses, they are not as forthcoming in their advertising to consumers. Instead, their marketing strategically emphasizes that their results will be faster and less expensive than treatment provided by a specialist. The promise of shorter treatment times for less money has resulted in even fewer orthodontic patients referred from general dentistry practices.

Another practice that seems to have become more prevalent over the past 20 years is the referring of patients by the general dentist to multiple orthodontic offices for second and third opinions. The most common explanation for doing this is the perceived reduction in liability for the dentist. True or not, general dentists have come to believe that if they refer a patient to only one specialist, they are then responsible for the treatment provided by that doctor. The theory is that if they give a patient several business cards, it transfers the responsibility for selecting the specialist to the patient. The result is that orthodontic patients now visit several orthodontists, and this ultimately makes it more difficult to be chosen as the treatment provider.

With more orthodontists practicing than ever before (and more being trained than ever before), more second and third opinions being sought, and more general dentists providing orthodontic services in their own offices, how do patients ever find their way to the offices of orthodontic specialists in 2015? Even though the percentage of patients referred by general dentists has declined, professional referrals are still an important source of new patients. Established practices garner new patients from the families of former patients and the recommendations of friends who were former patients. Although some patients found their orthodontist in the phone book back in the 1990s, almost no one uses a phone book in 2015. The Internet has become the new phone book. Additionally, whether they get our name from their dentist, their friends, or the Internet, today’s patients go online to investigate us and our practices well before they walk through our doors. For this reason, an appropriate online presence is essential for attracting new patients in 2015.

I discovered the World Wide Web (the Internet) in the early 1990s. Software disks from a pay-based Web service company called America Online (now called simply “AOL”) started appearing as enclosures in magazines, in the regular mail, and as giveaways at retail stores

that sold computers or technology products. These disks offered free software and complimentary starter hours on their Web service to encourage recipients to buy monthly subscriptions. Their marketing reach was so ubiquitous that at one time it was rumored that more than half of all computer disks on the planet bore the AOL logo. America Online offered services such as e-mail, games, news, and pictures. At first, the AOL environment was much like a gated community. You logged onto their servers, and they fed you their content within their “walls.” For those who explored the services they offered more thoroughly, however, AOL included a portal to the World Wide Web. At that time, the Internet was mainly a network linking college and university computers. It would be a few more years before stand-alone Internet “browsers” would appear that allowed users to bypass fee-for-service Web service providers such as AOL, Prodigy, Genie, and CompuServe, and directly access information on the Web. The availability of browsers caused a shift from Web service providers to Internet service providers who provided direct access to the Web without limiting the information available to a controlled environment.

A critical component of these new Internet browsers was a search engine. No matter how vast the amount of information available on the Internet, it was of no use unless users had some way to search for and find the information they wanted. In the early days of the World Wide Web, there were many competitors in the search engine arena. The mid-1990s saw the rise of search engines such as AltaVista, Yahoo!, and Lycos. In 1997, Larry Page and Sergey Brin registered Google, which quickly became recognized as the dominant search engine on the Internet. As of 2015, it is estimated that more than 90% of searches on the Internet are conducted using Google. Using Google to access online information has become so commonplace that “google” is now a verb in dictionaries. Making information about your business or product easy for Google (or any other search engine) to find is known as “search engine optimization.” Having a Web site that promotes your practice is useless if no one can find it.

In its infancy, the Internet was much like the brochure rack found in the lobby of an old hotel. The glossy pamphlets in these display racks were created by the businesses themselves and contained only information that portrayed them in their best light. It was common to be lured to a local attraction (zoo, outlet mall, or natural “wonder of the world”) only to be disappointed because the brochure was misleading. Businesses created Web sites that were the equivalent of the brochures in these racks. The information found on early Internet Web sites was also carefully crafted self-

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/3115260>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/3115260>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)