



Research

Facebook marketing in contemporary orthodontic practice: A consumer report

Trent Cox^a, Jae Hyun Park^{b,*}^a Formerly, Postgraduate Orthodontic Resident, Postgraduate Orthodontic Program, Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health, A.T. Still University, Mesa, Arizona^b Associate Professor and Chair, Postgraduate Orthodontic Program, Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health, A.T. Still University, Mesa, Arizona; and Adjunct Professor, Graduate School of Dentistry, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 March 2013

Received in revised form

11 December 2013

Accepted 18 February 2014

Available online 18 April 2014

Keywords:

Facebook

Marketing

Orthodontics

Social media

ABSTRACT

Background: The introduction of Facebook has brought additional marketing opportunities to orthodontic practice. Social media-based marketing is different from traditional marketing strategies due to its interactive nature. The aims of this study were to determine consumers' perceptions of Facebook marketing and to determine which features of orthodontists' Facebook pages are the most effective in attracting patients.

Methods: This survey-based study contained 35 questions and was administered to 140 individuals. The respondents were aged 18 years or older and represented various ethnicities. This study determined which types of marketing activity are most effective in attracting patients through the social media venue Facebook. The majority of the survey items were formatted based on a 5-point Likert-type scale. **Results:** Eighty-two percent of the respondents considered themselves to be active Facebook users. Forty percent indicated a likelihood of visiting an orthodontist's Facebook page before receiving treatment at his or her practice, with approximately 35% indicating that the Facebook page would be an important factor in their decision. The respondents indicated that there were key elements of Facebook that would attract their attention and help them to make their decision about where to receive treatment. Consumers indicated that the most important Facebook marketing components (in order of importance) are: 1) an orthodontist's credentials; 2) before-and-after photographs; 3) consumer-focused content; and 4) the orthodontist's photograph. Additional components that are effective include a link to the practice's Web site, links to oral health-related educational articles, and the presence of Facebook "likes" and "recommendations."

Conclusion: A Facebook page may be a useful marketing tool and a valuable addition to other marketing approaches.

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1. Introduction

Social networking Web sites like Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn have revolutionized the way we communicate. Since its inception in February 2004, Facebook has become the largest and most used social media site [1]. As of July 2012, Facebook comprised 955 million active members, more than half of whom logged on to the Web site each day [1]. In addition, Facebook memberships have increased by an average of 29% in each year of the organization's existence [1–3], which is a testament to the widespread popularity of the site. Even though Facebook popularity

has steadily increased, there is volatility associated with this and all other social media venues.

Although Facebook began as a social utility to allow friends and family to communicate with one another via "wall" posts, photographs, personal messages, live chats, "pokes," and status updates, it has evolved into a major platform for social media marketing [4,5]. Businesses can create a Facebook page—which is similar to a personal profile—to market their product, company, or services and gain Facebook "fans" or "likes" via engaging advertisements and quality content. A major goal of Facebook marketing is to influence the "friends" of those who are already "fans" of the organization's Facebook page, thereby reaching more potential consumers [5]. It is important to note that advertising through a Facebook page is different from using a Web site because it allows for increased interactions and communication among a diverse population [6].

* Corresponding author: Postgraduate Orthodontic Program, Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health, A.T. Still University, 5835 East Still Circle, Mesa, AZ 85206. E-mail address: JPark@atsu.edu (J.H. Park).

Several authors have researched factors that play a role in the process in which patients engage when selecting an orthodontist. Walley et al. [7] concluded that the mother is the most significant decision maker in the family when choosing an orthodontic practice. It was also indicated that payment plan options were more influential in the decision compared with the cost of treatment [7]. Those coming from families with higher incomes chose the orthodontic practice based on the skill and excellence of the orthodontist, attention to detail, and convenience [7]. Furthermore, Elgin [8] elucidated the factors affecting patient selection of an orthodontic practice by surveying 210 individuals. Elgin found that the most important factors influencing the decision are being made to feel comfortable, a caring attitude of the practitioner/staff, clear communication from the practitioner/staff, and a clean office. The least important factors were reported to be “office amenities,” which may include refreshments, video games, and Wi-Fi. Respondents also indicated that “doctor demographics,” such as age, sex, religion, and ethnicity, were deemed as unimportant [8].

Bedair et al. [9] performed a non-consumer-based study to determine orthodontists' opinions of the factors that influence a patient's choice of practitioner. The study concluded that orthodontists believe that the factors affecting the choice made by adult patients are “a doctor who makes you feel comfortable,” a doctor with a “caring attitude,” and “the doctor's overall reputation.” Similarly, orthodontists felt that the factors affecting the decision of the parents of adolescents are “a doctor with a caring attitude,” a doctor “who makes you feel comfortable,” and “a staff with a caring attitude.”

A recent article by Jorgensen [10] provides recommendations for orthodontists interested in using social media to promote their practices. However, this work was based on the author's opinion and experience rather than on data. He states that: the purpose of social media marketing is to bring new patients into the practice; families often realize the need for orthodontic treatment and, whether or not they are given a referral, they begin a search for any recommendations or complaints from former patients; a Facebook page can be useful in allowing the prospective patient to witness the interactions happening on the Facebook page including Facebook “likes” and “recommendations”; and it is important to make a link to the practice's Web site clear and present so that the potential patient can reference this component of the online presence as well.

No study has sought to determine which aspects of social media marketing through Facebook are most valuable as determined by the consumer. The present study sought to meet this need by exploring aspects of a Facebook page. The purpose of this study was to determine which aspects of a Facebook page are most important to the consumer and are most effective from a marketing standpoint.

2. Methods and materials

A survey containing 35 items regarding respondents' demographics, Facebook usage, Facebook page content, and objective ratings of orthodontic practices' Facebook page components was developed. These items were chosen with the goal of determining which aspects of a Facebook page would best attract new patients to an orthodontic practice. The majority of the items were formatted as a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = very unlikely; 2 = somewhat unlikely; 3 = undecided; 4 = somewhat likely; and 5 = very likely) [11].

The survey was administered to 140 individuals, all of whom were at least 18 years of age. This was a convenience sample; respondents were approached in public locations such as public libraries and youth sporting events throughout Mesa, Arizona, and were asked to participate in the survey. Some respondents included members of the A.T. Still University postgraduate orthodontic

residency patient pool, parent/guardians of patients, and students and faculty in non-dental-related programs at A.T. Still University, although the majority were approached and invited to participate outside the university campus. Minors were excluded due to their inability to independently make health-care decisions [12]. Approval for the study was received from the institutional review board at A.T. Still University.

Of the 140 respondents, 65 were male and 75 were female; there was a fairly broad distribution of age, ranging from 18 to 76 years, with the largest proportion of respondents in the 26-to-34-year age group. About two-thirds of respondents were Caucasian, with the remainder identifying as Hispanic, African American, Asian, or American Indian (Table 1).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Social media usage

Eighty-two percent of respondents were active members of Facebook, and more than two-thirds of the Facebook users reported spending between 1 and 5 hours per week on the site. About 18% of respondents reported that they did not use Facebook (Table 2). All respondents who used social media were on Facebook.

3.2. Influence and advantages of Facebook marketing

Seventy-six percent of the respondents indicated that it was likely or very likely that they would visit an orthodontist's Web site before seeking treatment with that orthodontist, whereas 39% of the respondents reported that it was likely or very likely that they would visit an orthodontist's Facebook page before considering treatment. Thirty-five percent of respondents indicated that the Facebook page would be an important factor in their final decision (Fig. 1).

Nearly 70% of respondents perceived the Facebook page as a valuable addition to an orthodontist's online presence; however, more people ranked a Web site as being more impactful than a Facebook page. Even though this is the case, the Facebook page has its place among the marketing efforts of the modern orthodontic practice [13].

3.3. Important Facebook page components

The components of a Facebook page that were rated as most important by the respondents included the mentioning of the orthodontist's credentials, before-and-after photographs, consumer-focused content, and the orthodontist's photograph (Fig. 2). The components included in Figure 2 were derived from a study

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents

Characteristic	% of Respondents
Sex	
Female	53.6
Male	46.4
Age group	
18–<26 y	17.1
26–<35 y	41.4
35–<45 y	24.3
≥45 y	17.1
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	67.1
Hispanic	22.1
African American	5.0
American Indian	2.9
Asian	2.9

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