

Commentary

Hanging the digital shingle

Dental ethics and search engine optimization

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Mr. William Jay was watching television and enjoying some popcorn when—crack—he broke a tooth on an unpopped kernel. In need of a dentist, Mr. Jay looked to the Internet for a provider. He opened Google and entered the key words “dentist,” “Larchmont,” and “broken tooth” as search criteria. The first result was Dr. Michelle Benjamin’s patient education blog; she had a practice in Larchmont, NY, and wrote a blog entry in 2006 based on cases in her practice for which she repaired broken teeth.

Dr. Benjamin’s blog displayed at the top of the results page because it had content relevant to Mr. Jay’s search. The search engine decided this specific page was the most relevant based on free text and meta tags mentioning “broken tooth,” “dentist,” and “Larchmont”; the site’s longevity; the number and quality of links from other Web sites; several blog comments and reviews; and the geographic proximity to Mr. Jay’s search based on Internet Protocol address. The content on the blog was varied and included a YouTube video, an infographic, and text about tooth repair interventions. The Web site’s links to the American Dental Association also influenced rank and credibility. After viewing the information, Mr. Jay felt confident that Dr. Benjamin possessed relevant expertise and contacted her office.

DISCUSSION

In our consumer-driven health care system, providers can have difficulty reconciling clinical duties and business interests with the social contract. Marketing has created persistent issues since dentistry’s inception as a profession; its inaugural code of ethics contained provisions on anticompetitive advertising to mitigate negative public perception.¹ Yet, somehow dentists must distinguish themselves in their communities, and hanging a shingle is done in profoundly different ways in modern times. As the dental economy becomes more complex, dentists strive to get their names to the top of prominent lists, including search engine results. Techniques leveraging the ubiquitous interconnectivity of the Internet allow providers to transmit a powerful signal through the noise of the World Wide Web of things. One such methodology is search engine optimization (SEO), and like other dental business strategies, its use should be guided by standards of professionalism.

MARKETING REBOOTED

Ideally, advertising connects patient and provider in a virtuous circle of mutual benefit; patients are drawn to services aligned with their needs, and providers enhance their visibility to the public. Practitioner, profession, and community all benefit when a vulnerable patient finds the chair of a caring, competent dentist providing treatment and comfort through skillful means. The Internet’s impact on dental practice marketing has been palpable. Traditionally, advertising was outbound and interruption based; advertisements, commercials, and press releases competed for customers’ attention by interrupting their activities when reading, listening, or viewing other content. The advancement of Web 2.0 technologies and search engine algorithms has allowed for inbound marketing, which embraces the idea of pushing information out to customers instead of merely pulling their attention.² The emergence of search engines has empowered consumers to find

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information about conditions, procedures, and providers through key words and search terms in addition to traditional marketing channels.

Internet marketing is impactful. The Pew Research Center reports that 72% of Internet users seek health-related information online, and 77% of online health information seekers begin research with search engines³; 1 out of every 20 searches on Google is a request for health information.⁴ Online advertising is increasingly important for dental practices; marketing research estimates that 87% of dentists maintain some Internet presence,⁵ and 30% of patients say a dentist's Web site greatly influences their choice of provider.⁶ Referrals and word-of-mouth are playing smaller roles, and SEO helps facilitate this trend.

Providers use various optimization methods to achieve higher placement within search results. Once a Web site is designed and loaded with content, a dentist might advertise by listing the site within online business directories, which operate like pay-per-click Yellow Pages listings. Dentists can also pay for top space on results pages, such as the sponsored links appearing at the top and side bar of Google searches; however, many search engine users prefer organic rankings to sponsored ads and skip over to the ranked results. SEO companies use various techniques to get clients' Web sites to the top of these algorithm-weighted ranks. Understanding the machinations of search engine algorithms, online marketers create key word-rich content for dentists and put it on homepages, blogs, and other sites to increase the likelihood of obtaining the highest ranking within the search results.² Internet marketers employ public relations personnel and professional writers to publicize online content, such as articles, awards, and events; the content may be created for, with, or by the client. Once published, those items are linked to and from the dentist's Web site to direct Internet traffic and gain a higher search ranking. In these ways, SEO enhances, or manufactures, the visibility of a provider's Web presence.

GAMING THE SYSTEM

The high-stakes business of SEO pits provider against provider as they vie for top billing in search results. Marketers probe search engines to ascertain algorithmic functionality, and search engine programmers continually update their codes to prevent users from gaming the system. The order of search results is of manifold importance to stakeholders. Evidence suggests that search engine users hold preexisting, implicit beliefs about ranking, such as the expectation that the top results are the most relevant to search terms.⁷ This research further indicates that the order of search results influences brand perception, particularly for unknown brands appearing at the top of search results.⁷ Studies conducted in human-computer interaction suggest that Internet search skills also play a role in search outcomes. For example, in 1 study, participants typically focused exclusively on the first 3 search results; 91% of participants did not go past the first page.⁸ These findings are supported by an eye-tracking study uncovering Google's "Golden Triangle"—the upper left corner of the first page containing the sponsored ads and top 3 organic search results—for which eye scan activity was most intense among people searching.⁹ SEO marketers can be the difference between relevance and oblivion in Web searches, but they need to crack the search engine algorithms to do so most effectively.

Although search engine algorithms are updated periodically to prevent exploitation, SEO may still be accomplished through 4 main concepts:

- how long a Web site has been established;
- the relevance of its content;
- meta tags or meta data, which are key words and snippets of text used for search engines' indexing that are normally and customarily hidden in the code of a Web page;
- the authority of a site, measured in the number of links to and from other Web sites.²

Providers with older Web sites have some advantage; however, SEO can level the playing field by refreshing content, enhancing meta data, and finding quality links to and from the target Web site. The degree of interconnectedness of a Web site with other interconnected sites throughout the Web is particularly important. As explained in Bar-Ilan's¹⁰ study of Google search engine manipulation, search ranking algorithms "give higher weight to links coming in from high-quality sites, in which a site is a high-quality site if it has a large number of incoming links." Bar-Ilan studied the phenomenon of "Google bombing," by which companies create fake blogs with positive stories and link them to drive Internet traffic in a seemingly organic way.¹⁰ This may be cheaper than purchasing sponsored ads, and results appear to be natural; however, Google is keen on ensuring the veracity and accuracy of its search results. Google has more than 63% of the US search engine market¹¹ and more than 88%

ABBREVIATION KEY

SEO: Search engine optimization.

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