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 by Michael I. Barr, DDS blah... blah... blah... blah... blah... blah... blah...

Breaking news! The Yellow Pages is dead! The Yellow Pages is road kill and the Internet is the semi that ran it over and then backed up to make sure it was dead. Fewer and fewer people are picking up that five-pound relic and flipping through pages of uninformative and nearly identical ads. Today, people are “Googling” for information about *everything*. Need a new local restaurant’s number? Chances are it’s not even in the “current” issue of the Yellow Pages. Google it! It’s faster and easier. Not only that, but after you find the phone number, you can go ahead and print out the menu! And, you can do it in less time than it would take to just *find* the number in the phone book.

I also believe the days of how we currently market in traditional media such as television, radio and print are numbered. Soon, these media will be powered by the Internet and become “on demand” services. Web site marketing is very effective, efficient and much cheaper than yesterday’s traditional advertising media.

The purpose of this article is to help you in your quest to make your dental practice Web site a profitable marketing venture. I will try to explain some of the fundamental factors and ingredients that separate a successful Web site from one that falls flat.

Does Your Web site Suck?

How is your Web site doing? Do you get new patients referred by your Web site? Over the years, I have heard from many dentists who are disappointed with their Web site’s results. Many have paid a lot of money and not seen results. The sad part is the vast majority of those Web sites were created by hired professionals. If professionals developed these sites, why do they fail to produce? You need to know this!

The Three Goals of Web site Marketing

There are three primary goals in your Web site marketing efforts:

- 1) Get visitors (prospective patients) *to* your Web site.
- 2) *Keep* those visitors *on* your Web site (hold their interest).
- 3) Get those visitors to take a specific *action* (usually call to make an appointment).

Getting Visitors to Your Web site

For the most part, people will find your Web site via a Search Engine. The three major search engines, in order of current popularity are: Google, Yahoo and MSN. Google has become so popular that it has become a verb in the English lexicon. Yahoo is a distant second in popularity and MSN is in an even more distant third place. Accordingly, my commentary will be Google-centric.

So, someone Googles “dentist (your town)” and gets to a results page. There are three kinds of listings on Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs):

- 1. Sponsored Links** – also known as Pay-Per-Click, which Google calls “Adwords.” These are paid advertisements that appear in a box in the top and right margins of the SERP.
- 2. Local Business Results** – looks a bit like a phonebook list of business links next to a small map. This costs nothing.
- 3. Organic or Natural results** – These are the listings (usually 10 per page) that occupy the majority of the SERP real estate. They cost nothing. But, they are the most valuable by a wide margin. You want to be on the *first* page of organic results.

Getting your Web site to show up in the organic results (#3 above) is a subject that has spawned an entire industry of

“Search Engine Optimization (SEO)” and is the focus of what follows here. This is critical!

The factors that affect search engine ranking include (in no particular order but I believe #s 3 and 4 are the most important):

1. Longevity/Tenure (how long your site has been online)

The one factor that cannot be bought or altered is longevity. Google likes longevity. The longer your site has been online the better. So, if you don't yet have a Web site, the time to do it is yesterday!

2. Keywords

Keywords are simply words that are likely to be used by Web searchers seeking information. Accordingly, keywords are the building blocks of your Web site. Keywords should appear throughout your site and in every component of Web site structure being discussed here. Keywords need to be woven into your Web site copy in a functional and logical manner. If it sounds or reads awkward, then you've overdone it.

The trick is to optimize your site for search engines while making it readable and coherent to everyday people.

3. Content/Relevance

Content is *king!* Content, or copy, is the text in your site. Google's primary objective is to effectively and efficiently direct searchers to Web sites that contain information most relevant to the words typed into the search box.

The more a keyword appears on a page, the more relevant it will be to Google. But, again... resist the temptation to stuff your site full of repetitive keywords to try to fool the search engines into ranking your site highly. Google can detect this and might penalize your site's rankings. Furthermore, the reader will likely find the copy awkward and uninteresting. If the copy does not fulfill the goals of the searcher (finding information), he or she will hit the “Back” button. Write your copy to be relevant to search engines and visitors.

4. Webpage Optimization – “Meta tags”

What in the world is a “meta tag?” Meta tags are simply hidden code in a Web site that search engine spiders use to sort and determine what that Web site is about. There are two primary types of tags that can affect your Web site's Google ranking. There are others, but the following two count most.

• Title Tag

This is a very important tag. The contents of this tag typically appear in the blue “title bar” at the top of a visitor's web browser. This is the title of your Webpage. Most search engines also use this tag as the link text in search results. That's what the searcher clicks on to connect to your Web site.

• Description Tag

The Description Tag is also very important. Many search engines use this to help index sites relevancy. As the name implies, this is a description of the Webpage. It often appears after the link text in search engine results. Make it readable to people who might use it to decide whether or not to click over to your Web site.

5. Inbound Links

This is a very important factor. Google places a heavy emphasis on inbound links to your site. In a nutshell, the more links that exist in *other* Web sites leading to *your* site, the better. Google figures if a lot of other Web sites link to yours, then your site must be important and relevant.

Keeping Visitors on Your Web site

• **Headlines:** Studies show that you have *four seconds* to get a Web site visitor's attention, or he will hit the “Back” button. I recommend headlines that suggest a solution to the visitor's problem rather than some clichéd platitude. Make it count!

• **Content is King (again):** Writing content is the most important (and tedious) task in the creation of a Web site. I strongly recommend that you do it yourself. Be prepared to spend a lot of time writing it and rewriting it. If writing isn't your thing, then hire someone who can help you. But, you should be directly involved in the copywriting. It should reflect your personality and your philosophy. Your input is critical. Write (or speak) from the heart. Do not delegate this task 100 percent to someone who might not have even met you.

Avoid using canned encyclopedic content in your site. Some marketing companies offer dentists instant Web sites where all they do is fill in the blanks with your name and location. The rest is content duplicated in all the sites they sell to dentists.

• **Telling stories** is a very effective copy writing technique. Consumers can relate to stories. Stories have been a part of human culture and education since the dawn of time.

• **Testimonials** can be very powerful. Include real testimonials using full names with permission, of course. A full name at the end of a testimonial is more credible.

• **Don't Copy & Paste!** Do *not* plagiarize or steal content from other Web sites. It's illegal and a copyright violation. Secondly, Google will recognize it as duplicate content and penalize your rankings. Thirdly, it's just not cool!

Photography

Just as written testimonials can be powerful, photos of your own dentistry can be very effective in marketing your practice. Put them together, and you've got marketing gold! Use smiles and portraits. No retracted shots, please.

It can take some time to collect enough of your own photos to fill your Web site. Until you do, you can buy stock photos from a variety of sources. The sooner you start taking your own photos, the sooner you can have your own work speaking for you. I also recommend you specifically mention they are actual patients.

Your Mug Shot

I believe it's a good idea to have your own portrait on your Web site. Make sure it's done professionally! Photos of your staff with short bios are also a nice touch in a Web site. Web site visitors will feel like they already know you the first time they step into your office.

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Getting Visitors to Take Action

Finally, the goal of your Web site should be to get the visitors to take a specific action. Usually that will be to call your office and make an appointment. Hopefully, the sheer genius of your copy is enough to compel visitors to trip over themselves on the way to the phone to call your office.

Make sure your phone number is on every page of your web-site. Consider putting an "Ask the dentist" or a "For more information" e-mail link on every page. Be sure that *somebody* is checking and answering those e-mails!

Finally, having a button or link on every page that enables visitors to request an appointment online is an excellent feature.

A Few More Things to Consider

Your Domain Name

This is your "dot-com" name. Your domain is your Internet name and address – your online calling card. Picking the right domain can make a difference in your results. Consider the following guidelines when choosing a domain name:

- 1) It should pass the "Radio Test." When someone hears your domain, will they be able to remember it? Will they be able to spell it correctly?
- 2) Does it contain good keywords? What do you do? Where

are you located? An example would be: www.MyTownFamilyDentistry.com.

3) Avoid using your own name in your domain: www.JoeSchmuckatelliDDS.com. Nobody will remember it, especially if your name is hard to spell. Likewise avoid cryptic names like initials or acronyms: www.LADDS.com.

Marketing Your Web site

Besides search engines, there are other ways to send visitors to your Web site. Whether you use television, radio, newspapers, magazines or Yellow Pages, I highly recommend featuring your Web site address prominently in your ads. Your Web site is a natural (and virtually unlimited) extension of traditional ads.

Your Web site address should appear anywhere your name appears: business cards, letterhead, street signs, office front door lettering, e-mail signature, practice brochures, business checks and even your return address rubber stamp. Shout it from the rooftops!

Get Some Help

Use a professional Web site designer dedicated to the dental profession. There are a gazillion so-called "Web site designers" out there ranging from your neighbor's kid to true full-time professionals. I've reviewed hundreds of professionally designed dental Web sites, and I have been amazed at the lack of basic optimization, poor design and abysmal copywriting. Some of these ineffective Web sites cost thousands of dollars. Choose carefully. Check references. This is your business and it's your pocketbook. Don't make the lowest bidder the litmus test for choosing a designer.

Conclusion

The Internet has added an exciting and seemingly limitless facet to marketing. There are huge marketing opportunities waiting for you. It isn't the "wave of the future." It is the "tsunami of today." As of July 25, 2008, Google had officially indexed one trillion unique Webpages! And, it's growing by several billion per day! Hmm... Maybe this Internet thing will catch on, eh? ■

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Author's Bio

Michael I. Barr, DDS, practices in Boynton Beach, Florida. He created his own Web site, learning every secret over his 10 years of experience. His Web site is #1 on Google in his area and serves as his primary source of new patients. Dr. Barr recently wrote and published *The Website Owner's Manual for Dentists*. You can learn much more on this topic in this acclaimed 200-page and fully illustrated marketing reference at www.revupmymarketing.com. For a limited time Dentaltown readers can save 10 percent by using the coupon code "Dentaltown" at checkout.

