

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE



A practice's positive Internet image plays a critical role in recruiting patients and growing revenue.

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Five years ago, if you had asked a physician about his or her online presence, the response probably would have been a blank stare. Few, if any, providers had an active online presence. There were hospitals, most notably the Mayo Clinic, that were leading the way in creating more engaging websites and testing out social media. Rating and review sites such as Healthgrades and Vitals were growing, but they, too, were being watched more by hospitals than independent practices. No medical providers were worrying about Yelp or Google reviews.

Some practices were beginning to take notice, but it was a manual-and labor-intensive process to search for online listings, update them, or try to drive patients to leave a review. It could be tedious and expensive to launch a new website, and few practices had the staff resources to update a website regularly, much less sign up for and post consistently to social media.

There was little evidence at the time to suggest that this was a focus practices should have. Most physicians believed that their patients came largely through word of mouth, and the data supported that. Why invest a lot of time and money on websites, online listings, and social media if you might not get any patients through

those channels? As with any marketing effort, there needs to be a reasonable return on investment. With other big challenges, such as the launch of new CMS programs and the changes associated with the Affordable Care Act, online reputation was low on the list of priorities.

In 2018, however, the landscape is vastly different. There is plenty of evidence today to show that a physician's online presence matters in attracting and retaining patients and that it can have a direct impact on

derestimated how powerful a positive or negative review can be when it comes to a patient deciding if he or she can trust your clinic with very private personal information. To remain competitive, it is vital that a practice has an easily accessible online presence and reputation."

A provider's online reputation is made up of all the areas of their online presence: website, social media, and online listings and reviews. And each of these areas has now been shown to potentially impact the recruitment and

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a practice's bottom line. Most notably, a recent survey conducted by *Software Advice* showed that 84% of patients now use online reviews to evaluate physicians.¹ In addition, Google says that two-thirds of patients conduct an online search before booking an appointment,² and in a MedData Group survey, nearly half of patients said the online reputation of a physician matters to them.³

"Word of mouth is extremely valuable and should always be encouraged," says Scott Mayer, MD, Director at Today Clinic, a primary and urgent care clinic in Oklahoma City (personal communication). "The new form of 'word of mouth' is the online review. It should never be un-

retention of patients, and, as a result, the practice's bottom line.

Practice Websites

Websites are the most common online presence for physicians. Practices had websites long before they began joining social media or worrying about online reviews. However, for a long time, most websites were fairly static and offered little in the way of patient-centric or interactive features. They were really no more than a digital business card with hours, contact information, and possibly a physician biography or list of services.

Today, patients expect more from a practice website. "A website can

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serve as a gateway to a practice,” says Mayer. “People want to know who you are and what your practice offers before they invest their precious time waiting to be seen. Convenience is

and the availability of pricing.”

Ideally, a practice website today should include:

- The practice location(s) address with Google map, phone number, and public email (not to be used for clinical questions);

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key. If you are hard to find and/or the information found about your practice online is vague, you will lose opportunities to grow your practice.”

With so many patients using online searches before booking, the potential to lose new patients is growing steadily. This is why it is critical to offer additional features such as aggregated online reviews and online scheduling. When a patient finds the practice online and clicks through to the website, he or she can immediately see feedback from other patients and book an appointment, no matter the time of day.

In 2016, Daniel Soteldo, Practice Manager at Westgate Skin and Cancer in Austin, Texas, said that his practice has gained nearly one-third of their patients through online appointment scheduling (personal communication). In a 30-day period, the practice had a total of 611 appointments. One hundred and seventy-one of those were booked online; and of the total booked appointments, 107 (or 17%) were new patients.

In a primary care practice, the average patient visit generates about \$100. The addition of 100 new patients would generate an additional \$10,000 in revenue. In specialty practices, the average revenue per visit can be quite a bit more.

Mayer suggests that as patients investigate practices more deeply, there are other features worth considering on your website. “I think reviews on a practice website have grown in popularity and the ability to set up an online appointment is crucial,” he says. “But I have also seen the need and demand for health education material

- Links to social media pages;
- Patient reviews and testimonials;
- Online scheduling, new patient forms, and so forth;
- A list of services, especially any patient-centric or online services (e.g., phone and eVisits, e-Lab results, e-Prescriptions, Ask-a-Doctor email, online appointment requests, and online patient history);
- Information about same-day visits or extended hours;
- A clear link to the patient portal (and online billpay if that is separate from the portal);

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- Links for patient education and patient communities (if applicable); and
- A blog or newsletter (this can be used to help generate content for social media).

Finally, a practice site must be mobile-friendly. Google will now ding practices in search results if the site is not. Mobile-friendly means that it opens in a mobile format on mobile devices and can be easily navigated as opposed to a standard site opening on the mobile device.

Social Media

“I think a social medial presence is a must-have for practices today,” says Mayer. “First of all, social media is so popular it would be foolish not

to take advantage of the opportunity to promote a practice to hundreds if not thousands of potential patients with very little effort. Also, social media may help define the ‘character’ of your practice better than just a webpage.”

According to Pew Research, about 7 in 10 Americans use social media channels.⁴ In various studies, consumers have said that they look for health information online, check ratings and reviews of providers, or use online health communities. However, another MedData Group survey⁵ showed that only 20% of providers use Facebook, and even fewer use other social media sites.

This is a missed opportunity to engage existing patients more consistently and increase the chances of being found by new patients. When done right, social media is an extension of a practice website and can be used to drive patients back to your website to schedule appointments.

For a small investment, Facebook ads can be used to help increase awareness on Facebook, which is the social network most used by potential patients. Soteldo says that

their practice invests about \$3,400 a month in online advertising to drive potential patients to their website. A small portion of this is Facebook ads. With 107 new patients booked in one month online, that investment has more than paid off.

The other top sites for patient engagement are Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. However, use on these sites by patients seeking healthcare information is substantially lower than on Facebook. So, if the practice can only justify one social media outlet, Facebook would be the best choice.

Online Listings and Reviews

Online listings with ratings and reviews also play a much bigger role

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today than they did in the past, especially with younger patients. The recent Software Advice survey also showed that 77% of patients now use online reviews as the first step in finding a new doctor. The respondents also said that it was important for providers to respond to reviews, but the MedData survey shows that less than half of providers manage their online reputation today.

Not only are patients using these listings and reviews to find a new provider, but recent research out of Harvard suggests that there is a bottom-line benefit.

Harvard Professor Michael Luca's research showed that where Yelp reviews penetrated a local market, the business of chain restaurants declined as consumers gained confidence about the quality of smaller, local restaurants. For independent practices, this may mean that there is an opportunity to compete against urgent care clinics, hospitals, and other large entities by using an effective online review strategy. It's a simple and cost-effective way to reach and recruit new patients. The survey also found that a one-star rating increase can be directly tied to up to a 9% increase in revenue for a small business.

The other benefit of increasing positive online reviews is that it helps the practice improve overall online search results. When reviews are combined with strong

search engine optimization on your website and a consistent social media presence, your practice can quickly rise to the top of leading search engines like Google, driving traffic back to the practice website.

Soteldo says that his online review strategy, combined with online ads on Facebook, Google, and Yelp, has resulted in 100% first-page search results. The practice sends out a follow-up survey to every patient within two hours of their appointment. This process has helped them generate over 700 reviews in less than two years. The practice now has ratings of 4.5 stars or higher on all the top sites.

Dr. Scott Kramer, an OB/GYN in California, also learned firsthand the benefits of adding a campaign to generate positive reviews. Using marketing automation software, his practice generated 250 social media reviews in a year and a half. He ranks first for his name in Google searches and has an average 4.75-star rating on first page search results, which has resulted in one potential patient phone call per day. User data collected by Kareo, a provider of technology solutions for independent medical practices, show that practices using its marketing solution can gain up to 20% of new patients from online sources.⁶

A strong online presence is now a necessity for practices that want to grow and increase revenue. It can directly impact a practice's ability to recruit new patients and increase revenue in several ways. "I think practices that don't take advantage of a website or social media lose a very simple and efficient way to reach new potential patients," concludes Mayer. "Most people will search the Internet for the nearest clinic or more specifically, the nearest clinic that provides a specific service. If you have no or minimal Internet presence, you will be passed up over and over for the clinic that does." **PM**

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