

# The Patient Journey

A combination online and in-clinic approach benefits patients & practices.

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**W**ith the rise of smartphones and Internet searches, an increasing number of patients go online to find foot and ankle care providers. While most clinics have a website, a *Facebook* page, and an email list, few apply a consistent, comprehensive marketing strategy that creates a financial impact. The sheer number of online options and the effort required to determine which ones will create real results can be overwhelming. But learning the basics and creating a plan can improve patient flow, generate revenue, and help you achieve your practice goals.

While taking action to gain visibility online is essential, it's critical not to forget about the patient's in-clinic experience. *Patients leave reviews and share real-world experiences online, so the quality of the care you provide, the cleanliness of your waiting room, the staff's kindness, and the efficiency of your work processes should exceed their expectations.*

Therefore, an integrated approach that considers the patient's experience with your clinic, both online and in-person, is vital. Coordination between these two parts of your practice can transform members of your local community from strangers into practice promoters.

## Building an Online Presence

Take a minute to think about how you gathered the information for your last major purchase—more than likely, that research started with an online search. A similar process happens when people are in need of health-

care services. By cultivating an online presence that shows how you help patients solve their problems, your podiatry practice becomes a viable option for those seeking care. "Online presence," refers to any Internet property or website that contains information about you and your clinic. An online presence should build trust with patients and present a professional impression similar to your clinic.

Along with helping new patients find your clinic and schedule appoint-

ing room used to be the sign of a thriving practice. Not anymore. In a time of social distancing and limiting contact, a website that provides contactless payment options and patient forms ahead of time facilitates a safer patient experience.

## The Patient Journey

To help us better understand why an integrated approach is indispensable to your practice's success, let's take a look from the perspective of the pa-

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ments, an online presence also provides other significant benefits. For example, providing online bill pay and scheduling makes these important actions possible outside of regular clinic hours. Offering these services will not only be helpful to your patients but will also reduce the workload on your staff. Instead of being tied up on the phone and taking patient credit card numbers, staff can attend to patients and perform other tasks. Some younger patients don't want to dial a phone number; they'd rather schedule directly on your website. For many millennials and digital-first individuals, this is the preferred way of interacting with your clinic, and they'll appreciate the convenience.

COVID-19 has disrupted many things we take for granted, including your waiting room. A full wait-

ing room used to be the sign of a thriving practice. Not anymore. In a time of social distancing and limiting contact, a website that provides contactless payment options and patient forms ahead of time facilitates a safer patient experience.

patient. A member of your local community is seeking foot and ankle care. She starts off a stranger to your clinic but finds you online and becomes a potential patient. Maybe you got lucky, or perhaps you're taking steps to improve your clinic's visibility online. Some common ways of doing this include: Search engine optimization (SEO), *Google* search ads, *Facebook* ads, etc.

These methods of improving discovery might sound intimidating or confusing, but anyone who finished four years of podiatric medical school can understand the basics. All it takes is a few of the right articles and resources on the subject. You don't need a computer science degree or know how to code to attract patients online.

If the problem is that the time needed to build and maintain your clinic's

*Continued on page 78*

## *Patient Journey (from page 77)*

online presence conflicts with the time you need to serve patients and run your practice, there are ways to navigate this issue. Working with an adviser who understands both podiatry and digital marketing is one viable option.

A common way to attract new patients with online visibility is via *Google* search ads. This form of discovery is shown only to searchers in the area surrounding your practice. Contact information for your clinic can pop up in search results when someone in your area searches “podiatrist near me.” Accounts are charged only when an ad is clicked, so they can be a great way to find people ready to become patients. Unlike most forms of advertising, *Google* search ads are relevant and helpful.

After reading your biography, patient testimonials, and the services you provide on your clinic’s website, the potential patient is starting to warm up to the idea of scheduling an appoint-

ment with you. Your clinic’s website is the foundation of your online presence. It’s the only place online that you truly own and have 100% control. Social media channels used to be similar, but now paid ads are required to reach all your “followers or fans.”

On your website, you’re able to project a professional image, show

not talking about clicks, CTR, or other marketing metrics that don’t directly impact your business. By having analytics installed, you can count the number of phone calls made from your website or new patient forms filled out.

After spending time on your website, the potential patient moves over to read a few *Google Reviews* about

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## **Prospective patients today do their homework (as much as they can) online in choosing the best practice.**

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how you help patients, and display the areas of practice that you love to do. If your homepage is an image of footprints in the sand with a heart, patients might think it’s cute, but they won’t see you as a foot and ankle expert or learn if they are right for your practice.

A great website also allows you to track and analyze real metrics that are important to your bottom line. I’m

your clinic. She sees positive comments, mostly 5-star reviews, and decides to fill out a new patient online form and request a consultation.

*Google Reviews* provide a strong signal to potential patients that you are a foot and ankle expert worthy of their trust. They are essentially an online version of word of mouth that lives

*Continued on page 79*

# MARKETING YOUR PRACTICE

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*Patient Journey (from page 78)*

forever online. What patients say about you is more valuable than anything you can ever say about yourself. Patient reviews are a perfect example of the complementary nature of your online and in-office approach to patient care. What happens in-office will influence your online reputation.

## **From Online to In-Office**

Prospective patients today do their homework (as much as they can) online in choosing the best practice. What is it that they are looking for? As healthcare workers, we experience both sides (healthcare provider and sometimes healthcare consumer). Stepping into those consumer shoes, maybe the more relatable question is: What would YOU expect from the offices, the doctors, and staff, which you have researched and selected?

Through your well-composed website, they have completed necessary online forms and likely even scheduled appointments. For most people these days, this is a great convenience. For the office, the result is documented communication and a more accurate and comprehensive health history. This is a great time-saving activity for both parties, as care can now begin minutes after patients arrive.

On that initial visit, patients will get a better sense of the practice and whether or not they made a good choice. First impressions can determine whether you get a thumbs up or down. This reaction may confirm whether they become an established patient or a one-timer. Often, great effort was made to get them to this point. So, what further actions are needed to make certain they will become marketing advocates for the practice?

Four especially critical areas play a role in shaping a positive in-clinic experience: 1) Quality of care; 2) Cleanliness of the physical office; 3) Kindness, professionalism, and staff's customer service; and, 4) Efficiency of work processes, or, in your patients' eyes, how efficiently the office is run. It should be noted that each requires daily attention and necessary action.

It is worthwhile to break each of these areas down by providing some practical observations.

### **1) Cleanliness and Safety of Physical Office (Scrub Up)**

Typically, the moment a new patient walks through your door, they look around. What they visualize and how they are treated become a very real gauge in how they judge a practice. Do they zone in on the very things you tend to overlook (like stained carpets or dying plants)? Is their first place of contact the front desk, messy and chaotic? How would they define their initial greeting and interaction by staff? If words like "rude", "neglectful", or "unorganized" have any bearing on their first impression, there is a really good chance these negatives will reflect on you personally and on the practice.

Some food for thought: Whether or not you see yourself as the next Dr. McDreamy, the truth is that just one unfortunate, unprofessional encounter (on the phone or in person) between your staff member and a new patient could likely result in their not ever getting the opportunity to meet you

*Continued on page 80*

*Patient Journey (from page 79)*

or experience your charming personality. Yes, this happens more times than you think.

This is where you can be easily proactive. Taking a walk in your patients' shoes is the best way to identify with what they see and hear. Stroll around your building and parking area. Make time to sit in your reception area, treatment room, and private office—and take in the scenery. Don't forget the restroom! What does your environment say to you? Since you cannot be everywhere at one time to oversee your staffs' behaviors, set and review guidelines with them in advance on expected conduct, what they should say and how they should say it. Then, as an effective training method going forward, role play some of the more common, recurring scenarios.

In the throes of COVID-19, now more than ever the need to have an

immaculately clean office space has not only intensified, but for many, it has become a game changer. Cleanliness has been taken to a whole new level along with necessary measures that ensure the safety of patient health and minimize the spread of a potential virus. Patients need to know if prop-

## **2) Kindness, Professionalism, and Customer Service of Staff**

Maybe it is this current political climate, the focus on differences rather than shared aims, the “it's all about me” attitude, the devolved respect for one another, or the other countless anxieties that are cause for concern—

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**Every practice should develop their own well-defined dress code that addresses attire, shoes, name badges, hygiene, piercings, tattoos, etc.; then follow it.**

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er PPE and protective shielding devices are utilized; if new precautions and protocols are put in place to keep them safe (i.e., social distancing, face coverings, patient temperatures on arrival, frequent disinfection of common surfaces), and if staff are committed to maintaining a sensible schedule to avoid over-crowded rooms.

in or out of the office. Whatever the reason, lately it seems that kindness and common courtesies are scarce, even though these challenging times call for understanding and benevolence more than ever.

It's exactly the reason why we should make a point to try even hard-

*Continued on page 81*

# MARKETING YOUR PRACTICE

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*Patient Journey (from page 80)*

er to be nice, genuinely kind, to our patients, regardless of our own personal stresses, any major decisions hanging over our heads, or the inter-office drama du jour with our team members.

Make an extra effort to reach out to patients, show empathy, and actively listen. One of the key “rules” for staff and doctors in every office should be “Enter and leave your negativity at the door”. We all know that negativity can cross over the office doorstep much like an infection: it is highly infectious, spreads quickly, and no one is immune. (And aren’t we all too familiar with THAT lately?!)

Sometimes we get so caught up in our busy workdays that we forget what being a professional involves. Well, it’s not that we ever really *forget*, it is just a temporary negligence in need of a gentle reminder nudge. Remember that first impression? It happens in the first four seconds that they meet us. Do we take the time to introduce ourselves, SMILE (a universal sign of kindness) and interact in a friendly way with them *immediately* upon their arrival? Or do they enter the office, confused, awaiting a cue from someone behind the desk who fails to acknowledge their presence?

As for the nudge...take what is necessary from this “Cliff notes” version of professionalism and share them with your staff in order to re-sharpen your skills and be the professionals that patients appreciate, respect and understandably, have come to *expect*.

**Ethics**—Everything you do in the office affects the practice, so you want to always make ethical choices. Since ethics are somewhat subjective (everyone has a different view of right and wrong); use your own sound judgment as a check. Ask yourself, “If I were in (my patient’s) shoes what would I do?” That is usually a good test of moral character.

**Compassion**—Demonstrating empathy and understanding for the troubles, pain, and fears that patients are experiencing is key to making them feel more relaxed and comfortable. Being more empathetic or compassionate doesn’t cost a dime, but is priceless to your patients. What these behaviors do is create better patient connections, which in turn leads to increased patient compliance and more successful treatment outcomes.

**Responsibility**—Be accountable for your personal performance and actions, remembering that all actions have consequences. Keep in mind that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction (Newton’s third law of motion).

**Image and Appearance**—The way we dress has a definite effect on our patients’ first impressions of us. Every practice should develop their own well-defined dress code that addresses attire, shoes, name badges, hygiene, piercings, tattoos, etc.; then follow it. Uniformity sends a clear message of unity—and it looks professional too.

**Integrity, Trust and Respect**—Deliver the highest standards of behavior representative of the practice so patients find it easy to confide in you and believe in you. Remember, respect is earned, not demanded.

**Knowledge and Education**—Patients should never have to wonder IF the doctor is capable, qualified, and

*Continued on page 82*

*Patient Journey (from page 81)*

properly trained to deliver care to them. Effectively addressing their concerns and offering state of the art technology and advanced techniques boosts their confidence in your skills and aptitudes.

Brushing up on team professionalism is never time misspent. By using some diagnostic self-analysis, scripting and role playing, unprofessional behaviors (perhaps innocent in nature) can be addressed and improved.

### 3) Quality of Care (The Right Stuff)

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), quality of care is defined as “the extent to which healthcare services provided to individuals and patient populations improve desired health outcomes.” Or, as one health official remarked, it is “*providing the right healthcare services in the right way in the right place at the right time by the right provider to the right individual for the right price to get the right results.*”

Without specific guidelines, factors associated with identifying quality care tend to be as subjective as the concept itself. However, very few professionals would disagree that a patient receiving healthcare within ANY branch of medicine should be assured that these considerations are of utmost importance:

- safe (skilled; accurate; appropriate; competent; minimizing risk, harm, and medical errors),
- effective (scientific, evidence-based, and comprehensive treatment),
- timely (available and accessible)
- equitable (non-discriminatory: does not differ in quality based on gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status)
- people-centered (attentive, acceptability, satisfaction, responsiveness, caring)

Delivering quality of care also means learning how to effectively communicate with the patient. You may deliver what you feel is a top-notch clinical protocol; however, if the patient fails to understand your approach or WHY it is important, or the potential consequences of not following orders—they may leave the prac-

tice with an adverse opinion of the care they received. And if you don’t already know, the implications of one patient’s negative opinion results in 10-12 other people hearing that opinion, leaving an adverse impression on those individuals, including the 10-12 people that *they* will tell. Worse than that, they post negative reviews on social media for all the world to read.

The best way to stay connected with your patients is through a pa-

scheduling strategies and policies/appointment reminders to improve patient flow, applying HIPAA and OSHA guidelines, just to name a few.

From a consulting perspective, ignoring any one of these measures will lead to workflow disruption. Don’t think for one minute that disruption goes unnoticed by your patients. If patients perceive a lack of organization, they associate it with incompetence, indifference, chaos,

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## The best way to stay connected with your patients is through a patient satisfaction survey.

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tient satisfaction survey. Sadly, it is not a common call to action. Often disregarded by practices, it serves as an essential tool for understanding clinical outcomes, patient retention, and medical malpractice. Surveys essentially demonstrate to patients that you care enough to make changes based on how they feel and what they think. Isn’t it better that you know this because you took the initiative to ask them, rather than read it in an online doctor-review site?

### 4) Efficiency and Process Management

Lest we forget, in addition to all the above factors that contribute to patient engagement, what also keeps patients coming back is the genuine pleasure of being in an office that runs efficiently.

Standardized, operational work processes and methods help provide structure and effectively guide daily activities. Simply put, process improvement involves taking a task from its current state (how it currently happens) to a future state (how it should effectively happen) in an effort to increase output. That means change—*necessary* changes that play an ongoing, critical role in maintaining a well-run practice while also having a direct, constructive impact on your patients’ every encounter.

Some examples of SOP (standard operating procedure) include financial/billing policies and practices, staff management and training standards, clinical treatment protocols,

and mismanagement. Even worse, they may believe, “If you can’t manage your own office, how can you manage my care?” This dissatisfied patient often becomes a lost patient.

What can you do to improve efficiency? Take an interest in how the office is run. The bottlenecks, the potential areas of weakness, unnecessary disruptions, and reasons for inconsistent patient flow. Consider team meetings/staff involvement to discuss these areas of concern, new technology tools, problem-solving and decision-making group sessions, revised job descriptions and telephone communication training. Create policy handbooks, distribute patient satisfaction surveys, and analyze routine financial reports. Sure, each of these suggestions take time, patience, and determination. Some are even challenging. Nevertheless, each one contributes to a forward-moving, **efficient**, successful practice and makes the effort worthwhile.

### After the Office Visit

Just because the patient scheduled a follow-up or paid for the appointment doesn’t mean the interaction is over. While they’re still in your clinic, it’s an excellent opportunity to gain direct feedback. So, consider putting in place a system to request a review via email or text message.

Online reviews are a powerful form of digital “word of mouth.” What makes this form different is that they live on the Internet forever.

*Continued on page 84*



*Patient Journey (from page 82)*

With positive reviews, patients tell friends, family, and total strangers that you are the trustworthy foot and ankle expert. They've moved from

a foot or ankle issue that you treat? Email marketing helps you cut down on the times you'll hear, "I didn't know you treated athlete's foot." or "I didn't know that you took care of ingrown toenails."

our patients; namely safe, timely, effective, equitable, and patient-centered. Run a check on each of them *regularly* and pledge that the care you deliver exceeds patient expectations.

- An organized, well-run, well-managed practice reflects on the entire healthcare team. Patients equate an efficient, service-oriented office with the type of care that they can expect to receive.

## Long wait times and being treated like a number are recipes for a one-star review or lack of follow-up appointments.

being a new patient to a loyal patient/practice promoter.

Some podiatrists are afraid to ask for reviews, thinking they will generate problems or only provide an avenue for problem patients to air their grievances with no recourse. While things like this can sometimes happen, you'll get more positive than negative comments in most cases. Even negative reviews can be turned into positives in a couple of cases: Patients are pointing out a legitimate complaint that allows you and your staff to review the cause and work on a solution to improve. It's unlikely that this reviewer is the only one who has experienced the issue.

You can reply to the negative review and show that you are engaged and listening. It's unrealistic and looks unauthentic to have nothing but 5-star reviews. Even if the review's content is false and boarding on slander, a thoughtful reply to a negative review shows that you are human, and willing to listen and resolve the issue brought up.

Now that they've left your office, that's your last contact with them until their next appointment or a new foot or ankle issue arises, right? If your patient opted-in to receive emails from your clinic, you have another opportunity to remain top of mind. When we say remain top of mind, we're not talking about spamming your patients. Nobody wants that. Email marketing presents an excellent opportunity to educate your patients. From foot and ankle health tips to showcasing the problems you treat and procedures you perform, as long as it's relevant and helpful content, they'll appreciate staying in touch.

How often have you had a patient go to their primary care doctor for

### Takeaways

- Digital marketing is about creating a process so your clinic is visible online to potential patients searching for your care.

- Creating online visibility for your practice isn't a "set it and forget it" exercise. As technology and the ways that patients discover and research healthcare providers change, an active approach is necessary to stay top of mind.

- While digital tools and methods are all the rage these days, it's important to think about the entire patient experience. A combined online and in-clinic approach is needed to help facilitate patient discovery, deliver an excellent foot and ankle care experience, and provide ongoing follow-up and communication with your patients.

- Patients want (and expect) a first-rate experience, first time, every time. Listen to and don't underestimate their judgment. Rather than use guesswork to determine their degree of satisfaction and to really understand how they view their experience in your practice, make it a point to reach out to them via a patient satisfaction survey. These days, insurance companies are using these very tactics (post-encounter online surveys) to establish which doctors to retain on their panels.

- Spending time to brush up on professionalism is not a "one and done" activity. By integrating various role-playing exercises, scripting, and self-analysis into staff meetings at least annually, many of the unsuspecting, unprofessional behaviors can be addressed *and corrected*.

- There are many factors (both clinical and professional) that work together to define quality of care for

### Wrap-up

While the times and tools are always changing, the overall goal remains the same...provide excellent care for your patients. Along with excellent care, a convenient and personalized clinic experience is something that more and more patients desire. Long wait times and being treated like a number are recipes for a one-star review or lack of follow-up appointments.

That's why an integrated online and in-clinic approach is vital in today's world. A plan of action that coordinates these two parts of your practice can bolster the patient experience and transform members of your local community from strangers into practice promoters. **PM**



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