



The Quiet Influence of AI on Patient Decision-Making

Now that AI is vetting your practice, you need to have a user-friendly digital presence.

BY SHAWN TOOLEY

If you run a podiatry practice, you've probably spent a lot of time perfecting your front-office experience. You've trained your staff on how to answer the phones, you've made sure the waiting room is inviting, and you've streamlined your check-in process. These things are all vital, but there's a catch: *Most of your patients have already decided whether or not they trust you before they even pick up the phone.*

We call this the “*Invisible Decision Window*.” It's that quiet period where a person with foot pain sits on their couch, opens their phone, and starts digging. They are researching, comparing, and forming deep-seated opinions about your practice—all without you ever knowing they exist.

If you want to keep your schedule full, you have to understand how to show up in that silent research phase.

Today, that window is being shaped by Artificial Intelligence. Whether it's Google's new AI summaries or conversational tools like ChatGPT, technology is now “vetting” your practice for the patient. If you want to keep your schedule full,

you have to understand how to show up in that silent research phase.

The Patient Journey has Flipped

In the old days, the journey was simple. Someone's heel hurt, they

asked a neighbor for a name, and they called the office. The “selling” happened during that first phone call or in the exam room.

Today, the journey starts with a question, not a provider. Patients aren't looking for “Dr. Smith”; they are

looking for “why does the back of my ankle hurt when I run?”

They spend days, sometimes weeks, acting like digital detectives. They look for:

- Clear explanations of their symptoms.

- Signs that you've treated people exactly like them.

- A sense that your office is modern, accessible, and easy to deal with.

By the time they actually make contact, the “exploratory” part of their

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journey is over. The phone call isn't an inquiry—it's a final confirmation.

Online Visibility Has Become Your New “Front Desk”

The biggest change in the last couple of years is how people find information. We've moved past the era of just scrolling through a list of blue links on Google. Now, we have *Algorithmic Authority*.

When someone searches for a podiatrist, AI tools now pull data from all over the web to create a single, authoritative summary. This might include your reviews, your website's blog posts, and your social media profiles. The AI might tell the patient: “*Dr. Jones is highly rated for bunion surgery, but several reviews mention a long wait for an appointment.*”

This is the new “first impres-

Continued on page 48



Influence (from page 47)

sion.” It’s happening in an algorithm before a human ever speaks to your staff. If your online information is messy or your website is thin on actual helpful content, the AI might unintentionally steer patients elsewhere before you ever have a chance to show them your clinical skills.

Building Trust in the AI Era

Trust in healthcare used to be built through face-to-face conversation. Now, it’s built through “*Trust Signals*” in the digital world. During that invisible decision window, patients are looking for three main things:

1) **Consistency:** Does your Google listing say you close at 5:00 PM, but your website says 4:30 PM? To a patient (and to an AI), that’s a red flag. It suggests a lack of attention to detail.

2) **Education:** Does your website actually teach them something? If you have a detailed page explaining

feet after foot surgery?” or “Can I wear my running shoes if I have a neuroma?”

This is called *Conversational Search*. AI is designed to understand

so they run an ad. But in the era of the Invisible Decision Window, being reactive is a losing game. You’ll never hear from the patients who looked at your practice and decided not to call.

If your online booking tool is broken or confusing, they’ll go back to their search results and find a competitor.

the intent behind these questions. If your website is full of stiff, medical jargon, the AI might struggle to match you with these questions. But if you write your content in a friendly, conversational way—the same way you speak to a patient in the exam room—you’re much more likely to be the “answer” that the AI provides.

Accessibility: It’s Not Just About Your Office Door

We usually think of accessibility in terms of being “handicap accessi-

To win these “silent” patients, you have to be intentional about your digital footprint:

- **Audit your info:** Make sure your name, address, and phone number are identical everywhere online.

- **Answer the questions:** Look at the most common questions you get in the exam room and turn them into short, helpful articles on your site.

- **Empathize:** Use language that acknowledges the patient is in pain or frustrated.

The Bottom Line: Meet Them Where They Are

The future of podiatry isn’t about having the loudest ads or the flashiest office. It’s about meeting patients where they are, which is usually on their phones, asking questions at all hours of the day.

The Invisible Decision Window is a huge opportunity for practices that are willing to be helpful, clear, and consistent. When you master this silent phase, you’ll find that by the time the phone actually rings, the patient isn’t just making an inquiry, they’re already sold. **PM**

Check for consistency:

Does your Google listing say you close at 5:00 PM, but your website says 4:30 PM?

the difference between custom orthotics and over-the-counter inserts, you aren’t just giving information—you’re building credibility.

3) **Social Proof:** Reviews matter, but *specific* reviews matter more. AI systems love to highlight reviews that mention specific treatments, like “best ingrown toenail experience” or “highly skilled with diabetic wounds.”

When these signals align, the patient experiences what we call “digital resonance.” They feel a sense of relief because they think, “*Finally, a doctor who gets it.*”

Why “Conversational Search” Changes Everything

Patients don’t type like robots anymore. They don’t just type “Podiatrist Chicago.” They ask their phones: “*How long will I be off my*

ble” or having a convenient location. In the digital age, accessibility also means how easy it is for a patient to “get” what you do.

Think about the “friction” a patient feels. If they have to click through five confusing pages just to find out if you treat children, they’re going to leave. If your online booking tool is broken or confusing, they’ll go back to their search results and find a competitor.

AI favors the path of least resistance. It prioritizes practices that make information easy to find and easy to act on. In 2026, being “accessible” means having a digital presence that doesn’t make the patient work hard to find you.

Stop Being Reactive, Start Being Intentional

Most practices are reactive. They notice the phone has stopped ringing,



Shawn Tooley is a digital marketing strategist and AI Lab Manager with Podiatry Content Connection, where he focuses on how artificial intelligence, search behavior, and online visibility influence patient decision-making in podiatry practices. His

work centers on helping practices understand and adapt to the evolving role of digital strategy in patient acquisition and practice management. Visit PCC online at www.podiatrycc.com or call (718) 557-9193.