



How to drive new patients to your practice Web site ... tomorrow

For more on this topic, go to www.dentaleconomics.com and search using the following key words: *Web site, dental marketing tool, Internet, online searches, search engine.*

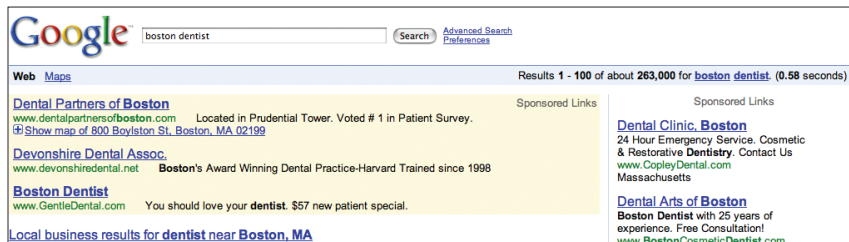
Should there be any question about the IMPORTANCE (AND THE IMMEDIACY) OF THE INTERNET AS A DENTAL MARKETING TOOL, just ponder the sheer number of online searches: about eight billion — *yes, with a b* — searches per month.

So the real question is: How can my local dental practice Web site capture well-qualified prospective patients from among this enormous sea of searches? The answer is that a local slice of the billion-search rush is affordably close ... using **Google AdWords, MSN AdCenter, Yahoo Search Marketing,** and other tools we'll outline for you here.

First, you need a good Web site ... Obviously, you can't take advantage of any of this traffic if you don't have an effective and professional site. (Now would be a good moment to check the online competition and decide about doing or redoing your site with these tips in mind.)

Has the response to your site been underwhelming? You built it, and to your surprise, they DID NOT COME. Fortunately, there are solutions that will blow those virtual tumbleweeds off your Web site and turn it into a thriving new-patient generator.

Search marketing reaches patients at the exact moment they're looking for your services. When someone uses a search engine (or many other sites), the results often include little ads above and to the right of search results, marked "sponsored links" or "sponsored results."



These ads — at the premium, top-of-the-page space — represent a tremendous opportunity for you. Out of the eight billion searches this month, you want to head the list when someone is searching for a local "dentist," "orthodontist," or maybe "chipped tooth."

While it typically takes months or more of hard work and luck to be listed anywhere in the top 10 of organic (free) search results, you can attract patients today by taking ad-

vantage of these key word ads (also known as Search Engine Marketing or SEM).

Start with Google AdWords. Search engine systems operations vary, and there are specific strategies that work best for each. Begin with Google AdWords; they are the undisputed leader and they make it surprisingly easy to get started.

- **Target geographically.** Known in the biz as "geotarget"; conserve your budget with focus on online searches by people in your service area.
- **Key words are the name of the game.** All networks have key word generators, but real success lies in brainstorming every possible word and phrase that searchers might use to find you. At a minimum, you should have 300 key words, and 1,000 or more is much better.

Think like a patient and generate a list of key words that he or she would choose to do a Google search. For example, a prospective dental patient in San Diego might look up "San Diego dentist," "San Diego dental implant," "San Diego tooth whitening," and/or "San Diego cosmetic dentistry."

Drawing from actual Yahoo network stats, San Diegans actually did search those exact key word phrases, respectively, 6,103 times for "dentist," 872 times for "dental implants," 4,866 times for "tooth whitening," and 1,044 times for "cosmetic dentistry."

- **Bid carefully.** Some systems use "bidding" that establishes how much you'll pay for key words. This will generally range from a few cents to a few dollars, but competition and the more relevant key words can push the going rate.
- **Use budget controls.** Although you may hold a bid on hundreds of key words, some systems allow you to set a ceiling on the total allowance authorized for the month.

• **Tracking is key.** Track the results and continually optimize your campaign. Make changes as you determine what works best, and do more as you find the winners.

• **Make local connections.** Direct visitors to a Web page where it is obvious that you are local. Web users will quickly move on if you don't have a local address prominently displayed on your Web site.

Caution: Resist being a "do-it-yourselfer." To their credit, the mega search-giants like Google and Yahoo make it easy for small businesses to get started. But busy dentists often do not have the continuing time and attention needed. So, it is often best to reach out for professional help to avoid costly mistakes and crank up the effectiveness by doing it

right. Call us if you'd like to be pointed in the right direction.

Search Engine Optimization: Free clicks. When (prospective) patients search online for services that you provide, does your practice Web site make the short list (below the sponsored ads we just discussed)? Sadly, a typical dentist's own patients may have a hard time finding the practice Web site, *even if they were to search for you by name*. Most searchers never get beyond the "top 10" search results, and a poor search engine showing means you are missing out on over 80% of patients who search online.

SEO Phase 1: Make your Web site "search engine friendly." Unfortunately, many Web designers are clueless about how to create a site that search engines can easily "spider" and catalog. Do you have a graphically beautiful site that is totally invisible to search engines? If your site has been online for over a year and is still invisible, chances are your designer has failed you.

Designers may completely overlook easy ways to make your site visible, such as including a "title tag" on a Web page — something most search engines value highly for ranking. Your site should also incorporate appropriate key words, descriptions, and "meta tags" into the source code, which can further help you be located. Even descriptions associated with your photos, your URL name, headline choices, and text count tremendously.

You should also make sure you get your Web site listed in the two most important directories: Yahoo (<https://ecom.yahoo.com/dir/submit/intro/>) and Dmoz.org (<http://dmoz.org/>). A directory is not a search engine; it is a human categorization of Web content. However, once you are listed in these directories, you are more likely to get noticed.

SEO Phase 2: For more advanced needs. Using these basics, most dental practices can be "found" by search engines, and within a few months should be among the organic results in local searches. However, if you are in a highly competitive category and geographic area, you are going to need to call in the heavy artillery.

For our clients in this kind of situation, we often recommend one of the Search Engine Optimization companies that we hold in high regard. SEO is a serious specialty that works continuously to make a Web site visible to the major search engines. Here are three important tips to advanced Search Engine Optimization:

❶ **Content is first.** Search engines love written text (they cannot read images), especially content that increases regularly and is laden with key word phrases. For competitive markets, you should generate regularly changing content.

❷ **Use "backlinks."** Systems give extra weight when they find inbound links — or links *directed toward* your site (not from them). In other words, if many relevant sites link to your site, it must be important. Google somehow measures the relevancy of links, as well as the value of the referring

site. So a link from your brother the plumber is not valuable, but a link from the *New York Times* probably would be important.

❸ **Don't cheat.** In the great game of SEO "getting noticed," there are rules — things that are not allowed and can be dangerously counterproductive. Search engines have seen every trick in the book and they will "blacklist" Web sites that use programming techniques to unfairly get ahead in the results.

Guerrilla tactics to generate traffic. Here are additional "guerrilla marketing" tactics (that are free or nearly free) to bring targeted traffic to your practice Web site — things you can do today to produce results quickly.

❹ **Basic ID and links.** This fundamental is easily overlooked, but always include your Web site address (URL) everywhere you list your name and practice name — letterhead, cards, brochures, signs, etc. Include a link in any online or other articles, news releases, etc. Always ask for attribution and a link when quoted, cited, or published.

❺ **Start an e-newsletter for patients.** With "permission marketing," sending an e-newsletter is low-cost and immediate. Collect e-mail addresses and "opt-in" permission both online and in the office. And post a library of this information as pages on your site. Encourage readers to forward the information to others.

❻ **Submit your e-newsletter content to e-zine portals** like www.ezinearticles.com. Submission of your content is usually free, and posting it online helps with search engines.

❼ **Use with your own publicity.** The nature of your profession and experience makes you an authoritative source and qualified to write timely and informative articles. Reference your Web site (with a link).

❽ **Post timely and useful links to others on your site.** Create a LINKS page on your site and list two dozen of the most appropriate other sites that relate to your topic, profession, or specialty. More importantly, try to get links back from these same organizations.

There's nothing simple about generating patients from your Web site. It's complicated and time-intensive, and to do it right you may want strong and qualified help.

The good news, of course, is that with the right firepower, the Internet can be a valuable and effective part of your marketing toolbox. And getting started right now puts you way ahead of most of your competition. **DE**

Stewart Gandolf, MBA, and Lonnie Hirsch are cofounders of Healthcare Success Strategies, and two of America's most experienced practice marketers. They have worked with dentists for a combined 30 years, have written numerous articles on practice marketing, and have consulted with more than 3,000 private health care practices. You may reach them by calling (888) 679-0050, through their Web site at www.healthcaresuccess.com, or via e-mail at info@healthcaresuccess.com.