



A Survey of US Dental Practices' use of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Aim: Social media is becoming the way for businesses, including health care professionals, to communicate with consumers. The study examines the use of social media by dental practices in the US.

Materials and methods: An electronic survey was sent to 22,682 dentists in the United States. The survey consisted of questions related to the use of social media in the dental practice. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparisons were made using a Fisher's exact test.

Results: A total of 573 responses were received. Social media was used in 52% of dental practices, the most common being Facebook. The use of social media was most commonly for marketing purposes (91%). Dentists younger than 45 years old were more likely to use social media in their practice than dentists 45 years or older ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Dental practices actively use social media for marketing and communication. Many dentists are unsure how to measure the success of social media in their practice. Additional research is needed to measure the success of social media in a dental practice.

Clinical significance: Social media is a common way practices market and interact with their patients. There are some difficulties in determining what appropriate content for social media is and how to evaluate the success.

Keywords: Technology, Practice management, Marketing, Social media.

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INTRODUCTION

Not only can anyone find information on the internet, but now anyone can create the information that is on the Internet.¹ A large part of this interactivity takes place through social media. Social media is defined in many ways.²⁻⁶ Most definitions encompass the following, 'Social media is user generated content that is shared over the internet via

technologies that promote engagement, sharing and collaboration'.⁷ Social media includes social networking sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. It also includes YouTube, blogs, customer reviews and wikis. Ninety-three percent of teens and young adults age 12 to 29 are online. Eighty-one percent of adults age 30 to 49 and 70% of adults age 50 to 64 are online. These numbers continually grow each year.⁸ Not only are Americans online, but they are participating in social media. Seventy-five percent of adults age 18 to 24 and 57% of adults age 25 to 34 use social networking sites.⁹ Facebook is the most popular social networking site with more than 800 million active users.¹⁰ Social media is becoming the way people communicate, look for and share information among all age groups.

It is estimated that 61% of adults in the US gather health information online. Thirty-seven percent of adults in the US use social media to find information about health and health care. Most commonly, adults age 18 to 49 use social media more frequently than those over 50 to seek out health information.¹¹ Social networking sites, blogging and participation in online support groups are the most common use of social media related to health.¹² The technology has become so popular that the term 'Health 2.0' has been cited in numerous articles and is related to communication between patients and between patients and health care providers.^{13,14}

With the use of social media so common, it is not surprising that doctors, hospitals, and other health care professionals are using social media to market, communicate and connect with their patients. Not only do private practice physicians engage in social networking, but so do hospitals. Thirty-eight percent of internet users look online for information about hospitals or other medical facilities.¹¹ In 2009, it was estimated that 255 hospitals in the US use social networking tools and 167 have Twitter accounts.¹⁵ Since then it is likely that the number has increased significantly.

Recently, dentistry has shown an interest in using social media to communicate and market to its patients. In 2010 *Dentaltown* magazine devoted a significant amount of the publication to the use of social media in the dental practice.¹⁶ Social media can be used in multiple facets of a dental practice. Some popular uses include sharing deals and promotions, sharing news and updates, networking, sharing knowledge through a blog, and providing customer service or monitoring reviews.¹⁷ Social media is also an affordable way to advertise a dental practice.¹⁸

It seems that the use of social media in dental practices is increasing as indicated by the number of 'how to' articles written in the past year.¹⁹⁻²¹ This also includes an article on having a Facebook page for your dental office written by Dr Edward Zuckerberg, father of Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg.²² Entering into the world of social media is a challenging task that should not be taken lightly. There are many ethical and legal issues surrounding the use of social media in health-related fields.²³

The use of social media in dentistry is emerging, but there is no literature on the use of social media in dentistry. This study looks at the use of social media in dentistry, how it is being used, who manages social media in a dental office, and other issues related to social media use.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized survey research techniques with a convenience sample. The Institutional Review Board at The Ohio State University permitted this study under exempt status. A list of 22682 dentists' email addresses was purchased from Dentist List Pro (Paso Robles, CA). A survey of 15 questions related to the use of social media was created and reviewed by a panel of experts for content reliability and validity. The survey consisted of questions about the use of social media in the dental practice and one open-ended section for comments related to the topic. An initial email was sent out to all dentists on the sample list with a link to the survey. Two weeks later, all dentists received a reminder email to complete the survey. One week after that, a final reminder email was sent. Responses to the survey were collected through an electronic survey program (Qualtrics, Inc.). Data was deidentified and analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparisons were made using a Fisher's exact test and Chi-square analysis.

RESULTS

A total of 573 responses were received, 550 responses were complete. Respondents were mostly dentist owners or associates (78%) practicing general dentistry (66%). Other respondents included office managers and administrative

staff (20%) and clinical staff (2%). Geographic distribution included responses from 46 states. Most respondents (70%) were between the ages of 45 and 64 and 61% were in practices with only one dentist (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic data for survey respondents

<i>Role in dental office</i>	N = 550 (%)
Dentist owner/co-owner	403 (73)
Dentist associate	25 (5)
Office manager	60 (11)
Dental hygienist	4 (1)
Dental assistant	6 (1)
Administrative staff	22 (4)
Other	30 (5)
<i>Type of practice</i>	
General dentistry	364 (66)
Pediatric dentistry	34 (6)
Periodontics	27 (5)
Endodontics	13 (2)
Oral and maxillofacial surgery	25 (5)
Oral and maxillofacial pathology	3 (1)
Oral and maxillofacial radiology	1 (0)
Orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics	59 (11)
Prosthodontics	21 (4)
Dental public health	7 (1)
Other	32 (6)
<i>Age</i>	
20-24	3 (1)
25-34	28 (5)
35-44	91 (17)
45-54	179 (33)
55-64	201 (37)
65 or over	48 (9)
<i>Size of practice</i>	
1	334 (61)
2	99 (18)
3	41 (7)
4	21 (4)
5 or more	55 (10)

Current Technology

A majority of practices have a website (87%) and 29% of practices are completely digital, 51% are partially digital, and 19% use traditional paper charts. Approximately half of the respondents indicated that their practice used social media (51%). Practices with all digital or some digital patient record systems were more likely to use social media than practices that used traditional paper charts ($p = 0.002$). Sixty-five percent of practices with two to four dentists use social media compared to 50% of single practitioners ($p = 0.019$) and 30% of practices with five or more dentists ($p = 0.001$). Dentists younger than age 45 were more likely to work in a practice that uses social media than dentists age 45 or older ($p < 0.001$).

Social Media

Of the 51% of practices who indicated they use social media within their practice Facebook (97%) was the most popular social media site followed by LinkedIn (38%) and Twitter (32%). The most common reasons for using social media were marketing (91%), communicating with existing or prospective patients (73%), and to have a better online presence (73%). Some respondents also indicated that they use social media to get information on prospective employees (27%). In general, dentists manage the social media account of the practice (34%) followed by office managers (26%) and administrative staff (22%). Others indicated that a marketing or management firm managed their social media accounts (13%). Determining the success of social media in the dental practice was a challenge for most respondents. Over half that use social media (55%) are not sure of the success of social media in the dental practice, while 38% felt it was successful and 7% felt it unsuccessful. Overwhelmingly 63% of respondents indicated that they actively use social media or plan to in the near future while 28% do not plan to use or have no interest in incorporating social media into their practice.

The final question on the survey left a place for respondents to comment on social media in the dental practice. Comments were analyzed and grouped as positive (28), negative (23), neutral (16), new to social media (20), HIPAA/privacy concerns (7), concerns with amount of time or money (10), unsure of benefit of social media (10) (Table 2).

CONCLUSION

Technology is spreading rapidly throughout the field of dentistry. The use of the internet in some form has almost become a standard for a dental practice to function. Not surprisingly most practices using the internet have websites, but almost half of responding practices are using social media. The results of the survey show that dentists use social media as much or more than the medical field.²¹ Not surprisingly; younger dentists were more apt to use social media than their older colleagues and therefore it may be inferred that social media use will continue to increase as older dentists retire and their younger colleagues purchase practices. As more practices are using social media to reach the new generation of dental consumers it will force more practices to use the modality to stay competitive. In the coming years social media will likely become as popular as webpages in the dental practice and may even surpass them in use.

Interestingly, the use of social media being generally in the smaller practices reflects the original intent of many social networking sites where individuals are able to communicate and keep in touch. That may be why smaller

Table 2: Example of comments

Positive

'I feel that social media is necessary to be competitive in the marketplace. It is common that patients look us up online before coming into our practice. It is also common for prospective employees to look us up and do a little 'research.'

Negative

'I had social networking sites about 15 years ago, when the social media sites were not as user friendly as today... It seems to me that the social media sites generally create more drama and gossip than actually promote the practice or assist people in keeping in touch with family, friends and staff.'

'In this day of information overload' I believe there is a line where you do not use social media post about some aspect of your practice—'check out our latest and greatest gimmick' will come across as a cheap plug.'

Concern with amount of time and money

'I am concerned about the staff time that social media might take.'

'I find the amount of time that I have to spend in managing social media for my practice to be outrageous! If I outsource it, it could be very expensive and I would have to monitor the material anyways?'

HIPAA/privacy concerns

'Due to HIPAA regulations, I struggle with finding appropriate information to post to best utilize our social media.'

'I feel social media is an exposure to liability (personal/private) I am unwilling to take.'

Unsure of benefit

'We use Facebook, blogs, etc. but not sure of effectiveness. We need to get patients to 'like' us first in order to get out our message. I'm not sure that the bulk of patients really want to 'like' the dental office even though they use Facebook extensively for other personal use.'

It is unclear, if it provides a direct benefit to the bottom line. What is clear, the patients who use it, give it more value than it is worth and the risk of any negative comments have a greater potential to do harm.

practices are making the use of this as they tend to be more personal than larger corporate practices.

Similar to national consumer usage¹⁰ Facebook is also the most commonly used social media tool used in dental practices, but this may change as the population's choice of social media changes. Dentists will likely need to stay current with their choice of social media to reach their patients. Dentists use social media for many reasons, but mainly to market their practice. This is why the use of social media will be necessary for practices in the future. To reach prospective patients the use of social media will be needed.

The effectiveness of social media marketing is difficult to assess and that is seen in the survey as those who use social media it was clear that there is a struggle to determine whether or not their use of social media is effective. Social media use will grow and how it is used will continue to diversify beyond just marketing but to communication with current patients and scheduling appointments. Future studies should examine how success with social media can be determined so that its use may be modified to allow it to be an effective tool in the dental field.

Along with the uncertainty of how to use social media comes the uncertainty of what is appropriate to post on social media sites. Within the results of the survey the concern for appropriate content to post in social media was evident. This indicates a need for education in the professional use of social media in dentistry to address concerns about appropriate use both legally and professionally. As was evident by many of the open-responses in the survey there are still many questions around the use of social media. The duty for this education will fall on our professional organizations and publications to help set the standards for the use of social media in our organization.

There were multiple limitations to this study. The sample of dentists was a convenience sample of dentists who had email addresses available. While the response rate was low (2.5%) the general demographics of the respondents is similar to the demographics of dentists in the United States.²⁴ The survey was also conducted through electronic survey software and those who use social media in their practice may be more inclined to respond to an electronic survey distributed through e-mail than those who do not use social media. These limitations are inherent in any modern survey using an electronic survey tool. The sample used for this survey may have undersampled those who do not use social media, therefore skewing the results of the prevalence of the use of social media. Future studies should seek other ways of sampling a more representative sample. While the study has limitations and may actually create more questions than it answers it is the first study to look at social media in dentistry and will lay the foundation and encourage development of studies of using this technology in dentistry. Research should continue on this subject to understand the best way to utilize social media and to understand its full potential.

CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This is the first study to address the use of social media in dentistry. We have demonstrated that social media is used in dental practices in the United States to varying degrees depending on multiple aspects of the practice. We can surmise that social media use in dentistry will continue to grow in the coming years.

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