

# FOCUS ON: Social Media

*Lou S. Shuman, DMD, CAGS, highlights the importance of a dental practice's Web presence, outlining 14 online rules of engagement.*

**Q:** How should a dentist prepare to maximize an online presence for their practice?

**A:** Let's break this great question down into what I call the *14 Online Rules of Engagement*.

**Rule 1. Treat your dental practice website as your online hub.** A dentist's website is still *the single most important tool* for creating an online presence. Here are 5 things every dentist's website *needs*: (1) An easy-to-use navigation menu; (2) easy-to-find practice contact information (phone number and address); (3) clear presentation of the services provided; (4) photos, including of the dentist and staff, of before and after patient cases (full-face, *not* intraorals); and (5) significant use of video (ie, YouTube), especially patient testimonials and patient education tips. A new favorite is a practice overview video on the home page.

Also, here are 5 things that *don't work* on dental practice websites: music and autoplay animation; splash intro pages; scary photos with dental instruments; dark color schemes (particularly black and red); and content that leads consumers to perceive the practice as cold, unfeeling, or institutional.

**Rule 2. Have a clear awareness of search engine optimization (SEO).** In order to make your website a powerful marketing tool, SEO has to be part of the strategy. SEO is the process of making your website more visible to patients and search engines, mainly Google, but Bing and Yahoo also. Here your Web pages, videos, or local listings are *ranked* based on what the search engines consider what is most *relevant* to the user. The higher your website ranks, the more likely prospective patients will see it. Also, SEO is not a DIY project. It's a highly technical science that requires constant attention, so this is one area where dentists shouldn't hesitate to hire a trusted professional.

**Rule 3. Improve SEO through better title tags.** Another way to boost SEO is through title tags. A title tag is the heading or title of a website, and it helps both search engines and patients understand what the page is about. Important keywords such as *dentist, dental, Invisalign, implants, even the practice location* should be listed in title tags. Every page has a title tag; if you don't set one, *Google will do it for you*, and this is rarely ideal. Work with your web designer and/or SEO partner to set strategic title tags for each Web page to make it useful to search engines and patients alike.

**Rule 4. Take control of your meta description.** Meta descriptions appear under the title tag on the *search engine results pages*, or SERPs. In a split second, a prospective patient will read the meta description and make a decision whether to click through to your website or not, so think of these as the elevator pitch for each page within your website—concise, compelling text designed to attract patients to the practice website. Similar to title tags, note that Google automatically creates meta descriptions for every website. It's up to the dentists and their Web designers and/or SEO companies to set customized meta descriptions.



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**Rule 5. Create a site map.** A site map is essentially a website's table of contents that search engines use to find and index all the pages. It ensures you receive proper credit for the content on your site, helping boost your relevancy and rankings. Site maps are not required, but having one can help support your SEO strategy, and once again, this is something to be created by your Web designer.

**Rule 6. Produce a steady stream of content. Content remains king online.** Why? Because search engines reward websites that consistently produce new and relevant content. Also, patients are looking for information, so having content sources including blog posts, photos, and videos can help attract patients to the website. Online content should read as though you're having a conversation with patients. Avoid using overly technical dental jargon and write in a way that is easy for patients to understand. Also, one topic per page ranks better, and duplicate content is useless and actual hurts rankings.

**Rule 7. Immediately implement a marketing release form.** Before you post any patient photos or videos on your website, *it is critical to have patients sign a marketing release form*. My recommendation is that you should have one for every patient. One of the challenges of this form is that the rules and regulations vary from state to state, so talk to an attorney to make sure you are covering all state and local requirements. Then get permission from your patients (or from parents/guardians if necessary) by asking them to sign a simple form. Once you have permission, you can start posting on your website and social media channels.

**Rule 8. Generate website backlinks.** A backlink is any link coming from another website that links back to your website. An example would be a general practitioner (GP) who puts a link on his website to the

local orthodontist's website. The GP's backlink makes the ortho's website appear more relevant to Google and others. Also, as you increase the number of backlinks, search engines will start to look your website as what is called a "reference site," which has significantly positive impacts on search rankings.

**Rule 9. Be active on social media.** Engage with patients on sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, or Pinterest, to name a few. Google evaluates social media activity and calls them "social indicators" with the belief being that the more active you are, the higher your website will rank.

**Rule 10. Make Facebook engaging.** Don't just create a Facebook profile and forget about it. Here's why: (1) posts with comments get *4 times more clicks* than posts with only likes, (2) 93% of the most engaging posts contain photos, (3) photo posts get 53% more likes, and (4) multiple photo posts increased clicks by 1,290%.

**Rule 11. Learn the best time to post on Facebook.** According to a study by the International Data Corporation, research that examined habits of smartphone users, 80% of smartphone users check their phones within 15 minutes of waking up in the morning. The study also determined adults are spending an average of 87 minutes communicating using social media Monday to Thursday and 160 minutes Friday to Sunday. Ultimately, you want to *post daily*, if possible, and at the very least, multiple times per week. Try posting at different times of the day to see which posts get the best responses.

**Rule 12. Fifth is as good as first place.** It used to be that to achieve SEO success, the only option was to rank first. As online search has matured, that belief has changed. Today based on recent research, 87% of all clicks from organic search engine traffic go to the first 5 results.

**Rule 13. Use existing online properties to obtain new patients.** There are various online sites available that can help bring new patients to the dental practice. You can register at *realf.com* and *healthgrades.com* for free to reach patients who are specifically searching for a new dentist. There are other low-cost options, such as paid listings on *Yelp* and/or *ZocDocs* that provide even greater opportunities.

**Rule 14. Don't make your online presence a goal; make it a necessity!** In just this year alone, 314 million consumers have searched for dental knowledge and dental practice selections. Make sure you and your website are there to greet them.

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