

Productnews

The value of free advice

The expectation upon dentists to educate their customers no longer begins in the chair. **Shaz Memon** suggests educational tools now come in many guises

Once upon a time, patient instruction was limited to within the four walls of the surgery – or, perhaps, the boundaries extended a little further into the practice's waiting room, with ageing oral health posters and dental care leaflets hidden among the pile of well-thumbed and dog-eared glossies.

Alas, when it comes to dentistry, there are no government-funded public education campaigns to inform and encourage patients through surgery doors. The onus is very much on the dental team to enlighten a public not always au fait with what is best practice when it comes to the health of their mouths – or what is available and achievable with cosmetic dentistry.

Communication online

Truth is, these days, patient education should form a key role in the marketing plan of any dental practice, which will probably begin online. The expectations of patients have undoubtedly changed due, largely, to the availability of digital media channels that promote new techniques and procedures. With this more consumerist approach, it is important to meet the needs of an audience hungry for informed clinical information and guidance that is easy to digest and inspiring to read.

Good patient management lies in any patient's first experience of you – and, more often than not, this will be via your practice website. Therefore, every effort needs to be made to ensure there are no surprises and/or misunderstandings as to what it is a patient expects from you and the treatments you offer – valuable advice, tips, and treatment descriptions (that include a list of the risks as well as the benefits) needs to be clear, honest, and open.

Communication via the internet can also be comfortably aided by the use of visual prompts, such as digital clinical images, 'before and after' photos, and 'satisfied patient' stories



that help new patients to understand the benefits and risks and view outcome possibilities.

Technological advances in diagnostics, treatment planning, and communication, and new developments in equipment, materials, and techniques widen the choice of treatments available to your patient base. Any dentist who embraces this high-tech world of dentistry but fails to share information about the opportunities it can provide is not only doing patients a disservice, it is also commercial suicide.

Many patients welcome the ability to access this information before they even set foot inside your surgery.

Call to action

Throughout the practice website, all words and images need to have clarity and be supported with information as to where patients can contact a treatment coordinator or access further information. It is vital that the call to action is a straightforward process, so do check to see if practice phone numbers have a clickable link that opens a dial dialogue on mobile devices and similarly automatically fills in an email

with the appropriate address for mobile browsers.

Web marketing is a relatively new phenomenon in the world of dentistry but, if done well, can prove an excellent marketing tool for a practice. However, there are rules pertaining to dental websites that need to be adhered to, including those that place an expectation upon the dental professional to advertise ethically and honestly.

It's worth paying special attention to managing the expectations of those who seek your services online. Overblown statements and promises of changing lives with 'smile makeovers' are, therefore, both unwise and unethical. Guidelines from the GDC clarify the position and, although there has always been a duty on dental professionals to advertise in accordance with standards set by the Advertising Standards Authority and the Office of Fair Trading, these regulations include what should appear on the practice website, along with what should not.

Additionally, good management of social media can amplify content. Potential patients are very often drawn from social media posts extolling the virtues of good oral healthcare, safe and legal teeth whitening, or the importance of orthodontics, dental implants, and so on. The information offered does not always have to be directly selling dental treatments or indeed your skills or your dental practice.

Giving away 'free' information is not detrimental to your profit margins – it simply aids potential patients in their decision-making journey and, ultimately, enhances their dental experience.

Advice is an essential tool in marketing yourself as an ethical professional and an enthusiastic dental educator, demonstrating that you and your practice place the health interests of everybody at the heart of its business. **D**



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