The ADA Practical Guide to Social Media Planning

Second Edition

American Dental Association
Social and Digital Media Subcommittee
Council on Communications
The Subcommittee on Social and Digital Media developed, and the Council on Communications and the ADA Board of Trustees approved, a Social Media Strategic Plan effective April 2011. A component of that plan includes social media resources for ADA member dentists, which led to the creation of *The ADA Practical Guide to Social Media Planning*.

The Council on Communications wishes to thank the entire subcommittee and in particular the Subcommittee chair, Dr. John Nase, for creating this practical and useful guide designed to help dental professionals’ plan and integrate social media into their communications efforts.

This publication is not intended or offered as legal or other professional advice and is for informational purposes only. Readers of this material should consult their own legal counsel or other qualified professional for such advice.
Introduction

This guide is designed to help you better understand how to use social media and to assist you — the dental professional — in planning and integrating social media efforts into existing communications and marketing plans.

Whether you are new to social media, or a digital native, you’ll learn techniques to engage potential and existing patients via social channels; make your practice more visible in a growing sea of online information; and protect and further your professional reputation online.

The guide includes:

- Details about how social media impacts business and why it’s important to participate
- Business-focused social media planning tips
- General best practices that can be applied to any social media platform
- Tips about how to manage your professional reputation on social media and online review sites
- ADA resources to use on social platforms
- Helpful links for beginners
- A goal planning worksheet
- A content calendar template

Use this resource to set the stage for social media success, and watch for additional social media updates and training modules on specific social media tools from the American Dental Association.
Chapter 1: 
Social Media — 
Changing the Face 
of Communication

Learning Objectives:

• Understand what social media is and how it can benefit your practice
• Explore social media’s growing role in how patients make health care decisions
• Discuss how social media impacts the way patients find your practice

Communicating with current and prospective patients through the traditional model of message broadcasting (for instance using print advertising, postcards, or your website) may be part of your daily business practices. Social media — web-based and mobile technologies that support two-way communication between users — is simply another channel to help you reach those audiences. The difference is that it also provides opportunities that aren’t available via traditional media. It allows you to interact directly with your patients; it provides patients with an outlet to comment on the service they receive; it has the potential to help you grow your practice through referrals; and it’s far less expensive than traditional advertising.

There’s no question that social media networks now also play a role in the way people make health care decisions. These networks, as well as popular online review sites, impact how patients find and evaluate dentists and empower patients to talk to each other about you and your practice in an open public forum.

A May 2013 Pew survey revealed that 85 percent of American adults use the internet. Breakdowns of that data are continually updated and the latest numbers show that 91 percent use search engines to find information and 67 percent use social
networks. In online data specific to health care published in January 2013, 77% of online health seekers say they began their last session at a search engine\(^2\) such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo. Another 13% say they began at a site that specializes in health information, like WebMD.

Additionally, 35 percent of U.S. adults have gone online to figure out a medical condition, and of those, half followed up with a visit to a medical professional.\(^1\)

Since people find much of what they need online by using search engines like Google or Yahoo, it’s important to understand a little about how search engines work and how they’re evolving. A number of things determine search ranking including links to and from other websites, the frequency of updates, how relevant content is based on what people are searching for, and more recently, social network activity. As social networks and sites with social elements have become more prevalent, they have also started to be a factor in determining what search results people see. For that reason, it’s not unusual to see a social network or online review listed first in search results — even above a practice website.\(^2\)

Recent communication studies also illustrate a shift in consumer trust. Consumers still go to experts for information, always looking for a credible source, but they also put stock in information they receive from their trusted networks. This is playing out in the health arena with a rise in patient-to-patient communication about health-related conditions via social networks.\(^3\)

Conversations about dentistry in general and also your practice are probably taking place via social networks whether or not you participate in them. And because social networks connect your patients’ friends, family and coworkers together, as well as rank highly in search results, potential new patients may find information about you long before they visit your website. That’s why it’s important to know what’s being said about you and your practice online.

Monitoring these conversations for your business and determining the best way to join in them, if at all, by approaching social media through a thoughtful process is key to managing your name and online reputation.

The following chapters will help you lay out a strategic social media plan, give you tips on how to manage your professional reputation online, and direct you to ADA resources you can use. Also, if you’re just starting to use social media and need guidance on how to set up your accounts, be sure to check out the Appendixes of this guide for a list of useful resources.