FOUR EASY STEPS TO MARKET YOUR PRACTICE ONLINE

BY STEPH WEBER

For decades, physicians have largely relied on word-of-mouth and traditional forms of advertising, such as the newspaper or radio ads, to reach new patients. Those days are gone. The pivotal role the internet now plays in patients' decision-making, ensures that failure to market online places physicians at a significant disadvantage.

These changing dynamics have forced doctors to view their practices and patient acquisition differently. Physicians are beginning to assume business models similar to other industries, in which online marketing efforts are integrated with traditional advertising methods.

And yet, physicians have been slow to develop an online presence despite evidence showing that it's crucial to patient acquisition and retention.

First, many simply haven't seen the need, as referral systems have long been sufficient in maintaining a sizable patient panel. "The old school of primary care and insurance referrals [is] the [traditional] marketing paradigm, but we know this is not effective," says Drew Stevens, a practice management consultant based in St. Louis.

Second is the fear of potentially of opening themselves up to widely-publicized criticism through social media or review sites.

Last, physicians are simply pressed for time: "With the average physician dealing with over 2,500 patients, there is no time to delve into proactive marketing," says Stevens. "In fact, a survey conducted of 5,500 physicians [indicated] this topic does not even come to mind."

That mentality needs to change.

A 2013 study by Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project revealed that 72 percent of internet users looked online for health information, particularly specific diseases and treatments, in the preceding 12 months. Similarly, a 2013 survey by Software Advice found that 62 percent of patients use online reviews rather than referrals from family and friends as the first step to finding a new physician. A subsequent 19 percent rely on online reviews to validate their selection prior to making an appointment. It's clear that physicians have to be where their patients are —online.

The good news is that, thanks to advancing technology, marketing a medical practice online doesn't have to be costly and confusing. In fact, it can be distilled down into four basic steps that anyone can take. These are: (1) Creating a viable, enhanced practice website, (2) utilizing techniques to be found by patients online, (3) engaging in social media and mobile health apps, and (4) monitoring your online reputation. We'll discuss these in this whitepaper as well as the best practices for each.

STEP ONE: BUILD YOUR PRACTICE WEBSITE

A top-notch practice website serves as the basis for all online marketing efforts, functioning as an informational hub for current and prospective patients. With a wide availability of user-friendly platforms, it's relatively easy to get a modern website up and running quickly.

Visitors to the site should be able to easily locate basic information, including the name of the physician, address of the office(s), and phone number. This information should be listed on every page of the website, usually in a static header or footer. Hours of operation and a biography page for each physician are also recommended.

In addition, Stevens suggests physicians include a listing of services offered as well as case studies. "For physicians just starting this process, this is all you need," says Stevens. "You should believe in the KISS method - keep it simple, keep it succinct, and keep it scintillating, so that it creates the actions you desire from prospects." Google released a study in 2015 showing that in ten countries, including the United States, internet searches made on a mobile device now surpass those made on a desktop computer. Therefore, it's critical that practice websites have a responsive design that accommodates both mobile and desktop devices.

"Patients are on the go and often trying to find key information in transit via a smartphone or tablet," says Kerry Ann Hayon, director of practice solutions and research for the non-profit advocacy group, the Massachusetts Medical Society. "Lack of responsive design could limit the ability to access information quickly and prevent a potential patient from reaching a practice."

Another way to enhance the patient's online experience is to offer digital forms, such as new patient paperwork and HIPAA consent, via the patient portal. This allows the patient to complete the forms at their convenience instead of rushing to fill them out in the waiting room. Furthermore, effective use of the portal satisfies meaningful use requirements for patient engagement.

The ability to make online appointments has become an increasingly popular feature as well and can often be the deciding factor for patients. According to a 2015 Salesforce report, 74 percent of Millennials select a doctor based on the ability to pay bills or book appointments online.

A well-designed practice website includes online booking and bill pay allowing patients to make appointment requests at their convenience. However, it's critical that requests are responded to in a timely manner, ideally the same business day. Any delays in initiating contact may result in the patient choosing another provider who met their needs more quickly.

STEP TWO: GET FOUND — NOT LOST — ONLINE

Once the website goes live, the next goal is to drive traffic to the site. Before doing so, physicians must decide what services or treatments they want to promote, which will in turn determine their ideal marketing targets.

"Doctors need to think in terms of demographics, geographic, behavioristic, and psychographic principles so [they] can instantly target the correct individuals, says Stevens.

Once physicians determine their focus, paid local search campaigns can be an effective way to reach prospective patients. By defining specific parameters, such as keywords, zip codes, or age brackets, pay-per-click (PPC) advertising allows users to target their intended audience. Those parameters are then used to create an ad as well as dictate when it populates in search results. Additionally, physicians can set a maximum advertising budget, offering more control over financial outlays.

Search engine optimization (SEO) can act as a supplement to paid advertising. Commonly called organic search, these are the results that are driven by the practice's website content. This type of advertising is generally more trusted by online users, as indicated by a 2014 BrightEdge study, which revealed organic searches resulted in 51 percent of all website traffic.

Search engines use an algorithm to determine how results are ranked. They consider things like the usability and quality of a site in addition to the number of directories, like Healthgrades, the physician or practice is listed on. "The new modality of the internet is content marketing that uses keywords and phrases that are readily used by search engines to find the proper websites," says Stevens. "Doctors need to use the terms most often searched for by patients."

Those terms fall into two categories: short- and long-tail keywords. A short-tail keyword represents a broader search term, while a long-tail keyword is more specific. For example, the short-tail keyword 'pediatrician' is a very broad topic with significant online competition. It would be difficult to rank highly in the search engine results. However, a long-tail keyword like 'pediatrician in Chicago that specializes in children with food allergies' garners less competition and increases the odds of ranking highly in local search results. Incorporating these long-tail keywords into both PPC advertisements and the practice's website content is critical.

SEO can also be improved by listing your practice on relevant directories. For practices, this might include Healthgrades, ZocDoc, and RateMDs. In the realm of search engine rankings, online directories are much more influential and rank higher organically. If

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a patient performs a search for a specific physician, the physician's directory profile will likely populate in a key location — the first page of search results.

A 2014 study by Advanced Web Ranking showed that on average 71.33 percent of searches result in an organic click on the first page, while pages two and three receive only 5.59 percent of clicks. Creating directory profiles on the sites listed above improves SEO, making it easy for the patient to find and research a physician, as well as initiate contact.

While dozens of directories exist, claiming a profile on just a few is sufficient. Sheila Nazarian, a board-certified plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills, Calif., focuses her efforts on just two. "Yelp and RealSelf are the most useful [for my practice]," she says. "I get referrals from these two sites daily."

Ongoing content, in the form of blogs and patient education, provide another channel that funnels patients to the practice's site. Consistently adding well-written, unique content to the website enhances SEO efforts. Since prospective patients aren't necessarily searching for a specific physician but an answer to their medical problem, creating blogs or pages that contain information on medical conditions and treatments is an excellent way to increase organic reach.

Blogs also have the ability to establish physicians as thought leaders while bolstering their credibility. Hayon explains how one physician developed a significant following simply by writing a series of blogs about diabetic weight management. "This physician saw an increase in new patients seeking care for diabetes and weight management," she says. "Blogging is a nice way to inform existing and potential patients about key services offered or [to] provide a mechanism to educate patients on overall health maintenance and wellbeing."

STEP THREE: GET SOCIAL

Social media has become an integral part of modern communication: According to a 2015 Pew Research Report, 65 percent of adults in the U.S. use at least one social media platform, a 7 percent jump since 2005.

CREATE A MARKETING MAGNET

Drew Stevens, a practice management consultant based in St. Louis, recommends physicians offer a simple marketing magnet on their website. The final offer will be highly dependent upon the physician's specialty, but examples include a free massage, vitamin, or eBook. Regardless, it must provide enough value to the patient so that the patient takes action. "Create a free marketing magnet so that individuals leave you a name and email," says Stevens. "This [becomes] a lead generation system without having to pay for lists and use other marketing activities."

As social media further infiltrates daily life, more patients expect physicians to use it. A 2012 study published in *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing*, indicated that 56 percent surveyed wanted to communicate with providers via social media. Due to privacy concerns, physicians have been slow to adopt social media although a study published in the January 2016 issue of the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that 18 percent of patients communicated with their physicians via Facebook.

Social media not only offers another means of communication but is an effective way to build community and deepen patient engagement. For Natasha Burgert, a board-certified pediatrician practicing in Kansas City, Mo., those are the primary reasons she uses it. "Patients are thirsty for providers who are willing to share what they know in order to serve their communities," she says. "Docs today need to encourage health on channels their patients are already using and social media is an opportunity to provide that needed leadership and connection."

Creating a stronger social media presence can drastically influence panel sizes too. Burgert, only a few years into practice has approximately 14,000 Twitter followers, and due to her exposure has had to limit the number of new patients she sees. In comparison, it took her senior partner 20 years to achieve similar results without social media tactics.

Trust remains an integral portion of these online relationships. "Traffic comes to my site from all over the world because of quality content curation and production," says Burgert. "Local traffic comes because people know me, and my online content is an extension of the trusted relationship we have already established."

Of course, the internet isn't everything; word-of-mouth still plays a role. Burgert says that prospective patients may hear about her from a friend or family member but then seek her out online to confirm what they heard. Active social media accounts make it possible for them to quickly connect with her.

Nazarian, less than three years into practice, has more than 38,000 Facebook followers. She uses the medium to promote her services and feature patient results, but also to establish a relationship with her followers. "Featuring patients and telling [their] story is very engaging," she says. "[But] in my experience, people want to know about you [too]. People often tell me that they feel like they already know me before meeting me in consultation."

While developing a referral system is a long-term goal, Nazarian has found that social media nicely fills that gap. "I am early in my practice and I cannot depend on referrals yet," she says. "It took six to nine months to start seeing results from my online presence."

One of the best ways physicians can promote their social media accounts is by linking them to the prac-

tice website. The built-in widgets offered by most website platforms makes it easy.

Physicians can also influence engagement by familiarizing themselves with the growing number of mobile apps on the market. These too can be linked on a practice's website. A 2014 report by research-2guidance tallied the number of mHealth apps at more than 100,000. Many of these apps can track a patient's progress and health status, creating data which can then be easily shared with physicians.

STEP FOUR: RECEIVE 5-STAR REVIEWS ONLINE

Delving into online marketing means that reputation management becomes necessary, too. Anonymity and easy, frequent access to the internet allows patients, both content and disgruntled, to express their opinions to the world at large.

"In addition to the myriad of websites, there [are] numerous places [online] where comments about you reside," says Stevens. "The web has created a revolution of individuals that dispense negative information online that would never be said to you personally. If they say in retail that it's all about the location, then on the internet, it's all about reputation."

Because these opinions can greatly influence others' decisions, physicians must be vigilant in monitoring their online reputation. Eighty-four percent of patients use online reviews to evaluate physicians, according to a 2015 survey by Software Advice. The same survey found that 77 percent of patients use online reviews as their first step in finding a new physician.

While not all healthcare-related, there are dozens of directories or review sites. It's not necessary to be active on all of them, but creating and monitoring profiles on several platforms is wise for boosting SEO. However, once you're active on an online directory, frequent and ongoing monitoring is necessary to maintain your reputation.

First, the listing must be claimed. It's a straightforward process that requires entering and verifying the practice information and culminates in the creation of a profile. Additionally, this allows physicians to manage and respond to reviews left by patients.

Then, physicians should encourage patients to leave reviews. Nazarian follows a simple formula. "If they express how happy they are, I ask them to thank me with a review," she says.

Due to the sheer numbers of directories out there, a reputation management tool can be helpful in soliciting, tracking, and responding to reviews. The tool does the bulk of the work, distributing customized patient satisfaction surveys to patients following their visit or an email encouraging them to leave a review online. "Practices can actually set up flags so that you can receive an email letting you know when someone has reviewed your [practice]," says Hayon. This allows physicians to quickly see what patients

are saying about the practice and offers the chance to respond to criticisms in a timely manner.

Review of notifications is critical. "Keeping an eye on where and when [negative reviews] occur and what they say is important," says Hayon. "I've seen one or two examples where the negative reviews were completely inaccurate, i.e. wrong physician, wrong practice, or wrong state, and those warranted effort in terms of working with the online site through the appeal process."

Last, since a reputation management tool constantly aggregates information about patients' perceptions, physicians can identify when reevaluation of practice policies becomes necessary. "[It] shows a variety of patient reviews, with attribution, from which the practice can evaluate their current brand status and patient policies."

A 2015 study by Nuance showed that 60 percent of people aged 18-24 tell their friends about their unsatisfying healthcare experiences. This openness, especially if shared on social media or physician review sites, can quickly go viral, compounding the negative impact.

Nazarian says reaching out to patients who leave negative reviews is key. "I want all of my patients to be happy, so I explain that I am so sorry that they felt they had to [turn] to the internet and didn't feel like they could express [their dissatisfaction] to me," says Nazarian. "I encourage them to come in, so we can see how we can make them more satisfied."

Responding to the criticism in this way also offers the opportunity to move the conversation offline. Physicians can encourage the patient to contact the office to discuss the matter further, allowing the public to see that an effort was made to remedy the situation while also preserving the patient's privacy.

Even though creating profiles on directories and review sites opens the gates for criticism, the benefits outweigh any negatives. According to a 2013 report by Bazaarvoice, 71 percent of consumers change their perception of a company when they actively respond in a public forum. The report further stated that more than four in ten consumers felt a brand or company who publically responds "really cares about consumers."

Online patient marketing doesn't have to be complicated. Create a website, drive traffic, use social media, and manage your practice's online reputation.

The final step is to… go offline! Physicians should inform patients of the practice's online expansion and encourage them to visit the new practice website and connect via social media. Flyers in the waiting and exam rooms as well as a gentle reminder at check-out can be instrumental in converting face-to-face interactions into deeper online engagement. ∎

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