



Building a social network



Claire Berry on why not being present on social media platforms can harm you and your business

It's not surprising to learn that social media usage in the adult population has hugely increased in the past 5-10 years with all social media platforms seeing rising trends. The Office of National Statistics has reported that in 2018, 89% of adults in Great Britain use the internet at least weekly, up from 51% in 2006.¹ With this rise in the use of social media over the years it is also no surprise we have seen a notable increase in advertising and the use of social media for business use. With statistics like this a huge proportion of the UK, or even world can be reached, increasing revenue for many companies who seek to use these platforms for advertising.

In the dental industry, many clinicians are using social media to inform their patient base on a local level, national or even global level. We now no longer need to wait for our patients to come to us, after all, these individuals are the motivated part of the

population. What about the rest of the population who don't have access to a dental team? Can we access these people via these platforms to give them advice? Can we make sure they have access to the advice we give to our patients in the chair? According to NHS statistics for 2017/2018 53.7% of adults in the UK visited the Dentist, leaving 48.3% having not been to the dental centre for treatment.² Could this 48.3% of the population be reached via social media platforms?

With the majority of people now choosing to watch catch up or pre-recorded programmes instead of live television enabling them to skip lengthy advertisements, advertising has had to have a huge shift in its strategy. Large companies are realising the potential of social media advertising for the promotion of oral health, not to mention the increased use of social media influencers that are now available to them.

The Digital Marketing Institute estimated that 49% of consumers depend upon influencer recommendations and 40% had purchased something after seeing it on social media platforms. In addition, 57% of companies now use influencers as part of their marketing mix and 21% are planning on further adding this to their advertising strategy in the future.³ With statistics like these then it shouldn't be limited to just the fashion and beauty industries. Social media is a very powerful tool by which we can send oral hygiene advice to our patients and those who don't regularly attend.

Whatever your opinion on the use of social media it seems this is the tool that is gaining the most momentum in marketing trends and it would be silly to not incorporate it into your marketing strategy. The rate in which social media is taking over our daily lives and our decision making as a generation,

makes this something serious to consider. As other dental practices are advertising their services in this manner to gain a larger patient following, it is arguably detrimental to your business if you are not involved in this shift of marketing strategy. Are we in an era whereby now we not only consider utilising these platforms as something nice to use, but actually detrimental for a business not to use?

It has been estimated that in 2019 there were 40 million active users on Facebook in the UK and 24 million active users on Instagram.⁴ It makes sense that we should be targeting people this way too. As a hygienist I have an inbuilt need to improve the oral hygiene of every individual who crosses my path, so when I realised that I could extend my reach to beyond my dental practice I was enthused. I now use these platforms to get my message about better oral hygiene to the nation. If you too are someone who wants to reach out to your patients or you are a practice owner who wants to use social media to get people through the door of your practice, then here is my advice to you.

As social media evolves so too should your strategy, so unsurprisingly you have to be aware of the current trends and fluctuations in usage. At the present moment there are double the users on Facebook than Instagram, however Instagram is becoming more and more popular with the younger generation, so if this is your target audience then you could choose to aim your attention there.

Your posts have to be entertaining to grab the attention of your audience. This is where you have to get creative! Why should they stop to read your message? These days' people want to be entertained so your posts must be fun to read, interesting, informative and thought provoking. Maybe you could mix it up and incorporate all of the above on your time line. I like to be professional most of the time to really get the physical message across and represent my profession, but I mix it up with being humorous. By letting my audience see the fun side of me I like to think they find me down to earth and approachable. I introduce them to evidence-based advice so that they know what I'm saying is backed by research. I intersperse this with funny posts, which are the ones that get the most attention.

Avoid being blinkered, see how other people are promoting via these social media forums, do they get your attention and if not, why not? What pages do you follow and why do you follow them? Maybe absorb what you find interesting in a page and apply that concept to yours. If you create something

you like yourself, you will be more passionate about it and enjoy the process of creating it.

See this in action and search for the likes of @dentistsinging who uses humour to send out a message. His posts are engaging and funny and grab your attention enough for him to use this concept to give his audience relevant information. He currently has 189K followers as his reach builds momentum. He also utilises social media in a number of ways to send a message. He is known for his informative videos, thought provoking posts, and use of photos and videos to show him in action. He is very active on social media, appreciating the fact he needs to grab his audience on a daily basis to stay relevant and on their news feed. There are many other dental professionals all working this way, which is fantastic to follow.

There are many opportunities to link a message to a wider campaign. For example, it was recently World Oral Health Day, so I decided to send a string of posts linked to this initiative with some simple messaging – 'Stop Smoking', 'Reduce Your Sugar Intake', 'See a Hygienist' and 'Switch to an Oral-B electric toothbrush' were some examples. My aim is to improve people's oral health. I want to ensure they know what products they should be using and where they can find them and provide a reason for them to use them at home. I also post about new products that come to market and where to buy them. I even have a website that has links to the products I recommend to my patients and the public so that they can access anything I recommend as easily as possible.

However, that said, let us not forget that we also have a duty to ensure we remain professional on social media and there are GDC guidelines that we should adhere to, as you can see in Box 1. It is widely accepted as a good way to communicate between our profession and the public, but strict consent should be used if images are to be taken and nothing is to be posted without a patient's prior permission (and ensure you get this in writing!). Using any imagery or personal informative information without prior permission is a definitive no. Nothing should be able to bring the profession into disrepute and this should be regarded at all times.

More people should be utilising this opportunity to contact the public and engage with them to send out the message about better oral hygiene, preventative dental care and access to our services. If we all did the same or similar, we could reach every corner and communicate with as many people as we can, hopefully leaving no 'stone unturned'. ♦

Box 1 Building a social network

What the GDC says⁵

4.2.3 of the Standards for the Dental Team states:

When using social media, you must:

- a) Maintain and protect patients' information by not publishing any information which could identify them on social media without their explicit consent
- b) Maintain appropriate boundaries in the relationships you have with patients and other members of the dental team
- c) Comply with any internet and social media policy set out by your employer.

Standard 6.1.2 of the Standards for the Dental Team states:

You must treat colleagues fairly and with respect, in all situations and all forms of interaction and communication. You must not bully, harass, or unfairly discriminate against them.

Do not instigate or take part in any form of cyber bullying, intimidation, or the use of offensive language online. If you share any such content posted by someone else, you can still be held responsible even though you did not create it.

References

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3. NHS Digital. NHS Dental Statistics for England Quarter 3, 2017-2018. Available online at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-dental-statistics/nhs-dental-statistics-for-england--quarter-3-2017-18> (Accessed April 2019).
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