



CHARACTERISTICS OF CONNECTED PATIENTS

And how they impact practice growth and profitability



by Diana Friedman

We live in a connected world. This simple fact changes the way you need to market your practice to prospective and existing patients. While providing superior orthodontic care is still critical, more and more it is insufficient to attract new patients and keeping the ones you have. Connecting with patients digitally, on their terms, ultimately drives the growth and profitability of your practice.

Who is the connected patient? Basically, it's almost every existing and prospective patient in your practice. When you consider 85 percent of the United States is connected,¹ focusing practice marketing efforts in digital mediums becomes imperative. By 2015 the smartphone use rate is expected to reach 81 percent.² All you have to do is take a look at your reception area to see this trend in action—almost every patient you have is armed with an Internet-connected device, usually a smartphone or tablet. It's ability to reach the connected patient on the devices they use that will determine the success of your practice.

The good news for your practice is that there are some common traits that most connected patients share. There are four characteristics of connected patients that should be leveraged by your practice to grow a loyal patient base.

1. Pew Internet, <http://pewinternet.org/Infographics/2013/How-Americans-go-online.aspx>

2. Digital Buzz, <http://www.digitalbuzzblog.com/infographic-2013-mobile-growth-statistics/>

Connected Patients are Mobile

In 2014, mobile Internet usage will surpass desktop Internet usage.³ No matter where you look, someone has their phone out and is online, researching information. With this pattern of mobile adoption, reevaluating your patient engagement and communication, website and social media channels, to ensure they are optimized for mobile viewing, is more important than ever. There are really two ways to accomplish this.

In terms of your website, it is imperative that it render optimally on any mobile device. This can be accomplished by building a separate mobile site that identifies the device and presents an alternate website that will work with a limited set of devices. However, the optimal way to accomplish this is to update your website to what's known as *responsive design*. In this scenario, your website is built on a state-of-the-art platform that automatically adapts the design and content to screens of any size to ensure an optimal patient experience on virtually any device.

In terms of patient communications, it is critical that your patient engagement platform is mobile optimized. This means your patients are able to view their accounts, pay bills, confirm appointments and access their records from any device.

The connected patient expects your website to work on every device they use. Your practice needs to ensure it's ready to meet these expectations in order to increase new case starts, keep patients engaged and drive referrals.

The future success of your practice is dependent on your ability to attract and engage them within the digital world. Connected patients are not swayed by traditional marketing tactics.

Connected Patients Rely on Search

There are more than 12 billion monthly searches on Google, which represents roughly two-thirds of all search traffic.⁴ The connected patient relies on search engines to quickly find relevant content and information. Consumers have become sophisticated, expecting this content to be prioritized to meet their needs, on demand. Case in point, 87 percent of all clicks from organic search engine traffic goes to the first five results.⁵ To reach the connected patient your practice's website or topical site (see the next section) must secure these top spots in relevant search results for targeted keywords.

This makes search engine optimization (SEO) more important than ever. Your SEO strategies need to focus on local search results. In a WebVisible study, 86 percent of survey participants used the Internet to find a local business and 72 percent preferred to find information on local merchants via search.⁶ The connected patient of most interest to you is the one who is local and seeks to make an appointment with your practice. So make sure your practice deploys an effective SEO strategy that is optimized to reach the right prospective patients in your local area.

Connected Patients are Topical

Due to the immense amount of content contained within the larger search engines, there has been a shift towards what's known as vertical search or topical sites. Basically these are websites or portals that cater to a specific topic or area of interest. In the last half of 2012, topical sites had an 8 percent increase in search traffic while major search engine traffic decreased by 3 percent over the same period.⁷ Examples for successful topical sites in the consumer world include websites such as WebMD, Amazon and eBay.

In the orthodontic world, the best example for this is Healthgrades.com. Today more than 20 million prospective patients search Healthgrades.com for a new orthodontist in their local area. More than half will schedule an appointment when a click-to-request an appointment feature is present.⁸ Topical search sites like Healthgrades.com can help your practice in a couple of important ways. First, they provide increased practice exposure to highly qualified prospective patients and drive more new case starts. A study conducted in February by Sesame Communications* found that practices with a Healthgrades Enhanced

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Profile received an average of 13 additional calls to the practice per month.⁹ Second, they also provide additional exposure on the more traditional search engine results. A listing on a well trafficked vertical search site in many cases will appear above your practice website on the regular search results. This obviously increases the opportunity for prospective patients to engage with you online.

The connected patient uses topical sites for assessment and validation of your practice and to request an appointment.

Connected Patients are Social

The connected patient spends time interacting with people and companies on social platforms like Facebook and YouTube. Last year 72 percent of Internet users ages 30-49 were active on social media. Even more interesting, 47 percent of Americans say Facebook is their number one influencer of purchases (up from 24 percent in 2011).¹⁰ Social media, done correctly, will drive new patients to your practice from referrals and foster loyalty with your existing patient community. However, as connected patients rely more on social media to make decisions and refer friends to your practice, they also expect more quality content from your practice. The days of adding a Facebook, Twitter or Google+ account and expecting it to act like a billboard for your practice are over. To ensure your social media efforts pay dividends, your practice needs to strategize and keep all its sites up-to-date, providing relevant, quality, patient-directed content.

The practice that can engage their connected patients on social media will foster the type of loyalty needed to ensure long-term, profitable relationships.

Final Thoughts

More and more of your patients are classified as connected patients. The future success of your practice is dependent on your ability to attract and engage them within the digital world. Connected patients are not swayed by traditional marketing tactics. They do not want to be sold. Connected patients want to quickly find you when they are online and build a level of mutual trust through consistent digital interaction. Developing a digital marketing strategy for your practice that focuses on the connected patient will drive more new case starts, improve production and ensure sustained growth and profitability. ■

3. <http://www.ezanga.com/articles/32-startling-statistics-on-mobile-usage-infographic>

4. <http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/by-the-numbers-a-gigantic-list-of-google-stats-and-facts#.Uw9GfPldUjU>

5. "Share of Listing Types and Share of Clicks." Search Engine Watch

6. <http://searchengineland.com/survey-search-now-top-resource-for-local-information-12396>

7. ComScore, 2013, http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Press_Releases/2013/2/comScore_Releases_the_2013_U.S._Digital_Future_in_Focus_Report

8. Healthgrades Use Study, 2013

9. Sesame Research, New Appointment Request Research Brief, February 2014

10. Infographic, <http://www.jeffbullas.com/2014/01/17/20-social-media-facts-and-statistics-you-should-know-in-2014/>

* Disclosure: Diana Friedman is employed by Sesame Communications.



What have you noticed about connected patients? Share at Orthotown.com after this article.



Author's Bio

Diana P. Friedman is the CEO of Sesame Communications. Sesame Communications helps orthodontic practices harness the power of the Internet to accelerate new patient acquisition, build patient loyalty and transform the patient experience. The Sesame 24-7 Patient Engagement Management System provides an innovative and comprehensive set of solutions that help boost practice growth and profitability. For more information, visit www.sesamecommunications.com.

