

Advertising YOUR PRACTICE

What are the most effective outlets?










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In a rapidly evolving tech and media landscape, an effective advertising strategy now takes more than the work of a few 'Mad Men' — especially for dermatologists. Whether a practice is looking to recruit new patients, transition consults into appointments, or retain loyal long-term patients, an ad in the local paper or relying on referrals alone is unlikely to cut it.

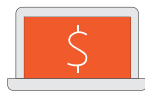
Whether you're relocating to a new area, or looking to make your local community more aware of the services you offer as a dermatologist, advertising can play a key role in the success of a practice regardless of its focus. "If you're just doing cosmetic work, you want to identify whether or not there's a big enough vanity market out there, or perhaps whether it needs someone to bring the vanity market to life," explains Neal Bhatia, MD, a dermatologist in San Diego. Dr. Bhatia argues that solid marketing is equally as important for medical dermatology, particularly so that patients who uniquely require dermatologic care know where to find it. "Without the knowledge that the dermatologist is there for medical problems, that potential referral base is lost. Dermatologists are now competing with day spas, Minute Clinics, and online teledermatology sites that are really poaching away at the full exam that a dermatologist can give. Partly that relates back to access, but some of that also has to do with marketing. If the average patient isn't aware of what the dermatologist really does, by the time they come to see me it could be too late."

In this feature, *Dermatology World* consults with physicians and industry professionals to create a beginner's guide for advertising best practices in the areas of:

-  **Practice websites**
-  **Social media**
-  **Local SEO**
-  **Paid search**
-  **Word of mouth**
-  **Traditional outlets**
-  **Responding to online reviews >>**

Web marketing

For many, the web has become the de facto resource for looking up health care information, searching for providers, and leaving feedback on care — making it a main target for dermatologists to focus their advertising efforts on. For physicians, taking an active role in shaping their online presence is now less a choice than a necessity, says Risa Goldman Luksa, president of Goldman Marketing Group. “One very important area is sites like Yelp and how they factor into your online reputation,” she explains. “People will use review sites alone to find doctors, but even if patients are referred to you from a friend or another physician, they’re still going to Google you, and those ratings will still show up on page one of the search results. If you have bad star ratings, it could deter a patient from coming to you in the first place.” (See sidebar for more on how to manage online reviews.)



Polished practice websites

For a growing number of patients, if a practice doesn’t have a website, it may as well not exist. “Your website is the foundation of your marketing strategy,” says Goldman Luksa. “You need to consider both aesthetics and content, and whether they’re set to compel patients to actually pick up the phone to call or email.”

From a design perspective, the best place to start is by looking at overall marketing trends — even those outside of health care — when considering the design for a re-launch or new practice website. Taking time to review competitors’ sites can be helpful in identifying what’s up-to-date. Current web design trends favor a cleaner look, including ghost buttons, grid-based layouts, full-screen photo backgrounds, and flat web design. A responsive site, of course, is now nearly required, as patients are increasingly likely to search for potential providers from their mobile devices. (For more on the basics of building an effective practice website, see *Dermatology World’s* May 2016 feature, “Wrangling the web,” at www.aad.org/dw/monthly/2016/may/wrangling-the-web.)

Once patients have found your site, how do you keep them coming back? Beth Santmyre-Rosenberger, MD, has tackled this challenge by adding the option to sign up for an email newsletter campaign via her website. Dr. Santmyre-Rosenberger, who practices in Fairmont, West Virginia, says the newsletter has been particularly helpful in keeping her at the forefront of patient’s minds should they need dermatologic care. “I listen to a lot of business podcasts. Most of them suggest that for a small business, establishing an email list for direct-to-patient marketing is of utmost importance. Currently, I’ve been using it as a way to engage patients on an ongoing basis,” she says. “At this point, I am very busy booking months out, so my

marketing goals are just keeping our practice at the top of people’s mind when they need someone.”

Additionally, a practice’s website can be an opportunity for physicians to “introduce” themselves to patients prior to their first visit. “You have to make it easy for a patient to try to get an appointment, to understand what your clinic does or doesn’t do, and more importantly, what your background is and who you are,” says Dr. Bhatia. “Listing your credentials, research, teaching, and any articles you’ve authored or contributed to are also a big draw.”



Strong social media

Social media’s role in a dermatology practice’s advertising strategy can be highly variable, however it generally falls into two buckets: using social media for advertising, and advertising on social media. With the former, physicians can draw attention to their practice by using various platforms to reach out to both patients and potential patients by offering health tips, sharing medical news, showing before and after photos, or giving a general introduction to the practice’s staff.

Chris Adigun, MD, a dermatologist in private practice in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has found social media to be helpful in this regard, explaining, “In some states it is absolutely crucial, as it is how the public selects their physicians. In our office, we rely on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, in addition to our practice website. We’ve also created a geofilter specific to our practice in Snapchat. That’s been great for our more tech-savvy patients.” (Snapchat allows businesses to purchase customized location filters that appear over users’ photos when taken in a specified area with GPS capabilities enabled.)

In addition to advertising with social media, dermatologists can also advertise directly on the platforms themselves, which can yield access to a broader audience for relatively low costs, according to Dr. Santmyre-Rosenberger. “Facebook marketing is much more effective than traditional marketing. You can very specifically set a target audience and follow how many people are seeing your ads,” she says. “Facebook is also very reasonably priced. You can reach thousands of people for less than five dollars.”

However, physicians looking to log on to the social media scene should be prepared for the time and upkeep required to maintain professional practice profiles. Bad social media can be more harmful than no social media presence at all, warns Goldman Luksa. “It’s extremely important that at the very least it’s monitored daily. What if someone posts a comment, or takes down your cover photo? While I think it also looks unprofessional if it hasn’t been updated in a long time, if your practice is

Everyone's a critic: ADDRESSING ONLINE REVIEWS

going to establish a social media presence, it needs to be monitored and maintained at a minimum." And that doesn't mean having a staff member's teenager minding the store, she says; they may be expert social media users, but they probably do not know about HIPAA, and any typos or inaccuracies they post could be your reputation.

Dr. Bhatia agrees that if dermatologists are going to attempt social media, they should do so strategically. "In NYC or bigger markets, you'll have a lot of derms with Twitter pages who will tweet about Melanoma Monday, or other things that can be very productive for both education and marketing. But you don't want to end up looking like Trump and tweeting a bunch of nonsense."

For physicians finding it difficult to connect with patients in 140 characters or less, blogging may be a more flexible option. Since launching her blog, Dr. Santmyire-Rosenberger says it has been helpful as both an educational and relationship-building tool. "I like to write my own educational handouts that explain things in the exact words that I would use if I were educating them in person," she explains. "The blog has been a way to expand my educational materials. I think for new patients, reading the blog articles gives them a glimpse into my personality, and how I practice, before they arrive."



Locking down local SEO

So how do you make sure all those patients Googling your name actually see your site ranked in the search results? Search engine optimization (SEO) is key. Strong local SEO is specifically targeted at getting a business — or medical practice — to show up in correlation with geographically relevant keywords. "You should be paying attention to how your site ranks in Google," says Goldman Luksa. "Does it show up if someone searches 'best dermatologist in Nashville,' or 'best doctor for acne in San Francisco'?" She recommends using an 'incognito' window to get more accurate results.

One simple step to help your practice rank in local SEO results is to include geographic terms in your website in a way that's natural and won't set off spam filters. ("Cleveland dermatologist who serves Cleveland patients" would be spam-triggering, for example.)

In addition to creating relevant content that corresponds to your location, verifying that your practice's location information is consistent in as many places as possible can help build local SEO. Failure to update old location listings can potentially confuse search engines and compromise page rankings — something that Dr. Bhatia can

"Online reviews affect every doctor, even the best," says Risa Goldman Luksa, president of Goldman Marketing Group. "They're just part of having a practice nowadays, and unfortunately even the best doctors will get a negative review at some point." While negative online reviews can be frustrating, many physicians' first impulses — to counter the claims or simply ignore them — may be misguided.

"I definitely think it's important to respond," advises Goldman Luksa. "If you know who the patient is, maybe you can try to work it out behind the scenes with them, but whether you do it through a public or private method, it's definitely important to address the concern." However, responses to negative reviews concerning care should be handled with caution. Arguing with patients online can appear unprofessional and vindictive, and can potentially reveal details exposing PHI. The best responses are generally short, unspecific, and humble.

"Typically my office manager will take the high road and say something like, 'sorry you had to wait so long, or 'sorry things didn't work out; medicine isn't an exact science.' There are a lot of different things you can say to make it look like you've at least acknowledged the issue," says Neal Bhatia, MD. "You can't go back and blast people as much as you might want to."

If the patient who left the review can be confidently identified (or if they've identified themselves), the practice can potentially contact them — albeit privately. This should only be done if their identity is absolutely certain, as a wrong guess can potentially result in a HIPAA violation if PHI is revealed to the wrong patient. Suing for perceived slander is generally unsuccessful, and potentially bad PR, causing damage to the physician's brand and perception of their customer service even if the suit is successful in favor of the practice.

Rather than trying to stop or fight bad reviews, a better tactic is to help facilitate happy patients to leave positive reviews, advises Goldman Luksa. "It's important to have initiatives in place to drive happy patients to leave reviews, because generally happy patients will tell friends and family about their experience, whereas unhappy patients vent to Yelp."



For more on dealing with online reviews, check out July's Legally Speaking column at www.aad.org/dw/monthly/2017/july/avoiding-the-pitfalls-of-social-media.

attest to. “We designed the website based on what would draw general patients in, and also got help with some SEO challenges and location issues. When I moved to California, they thought my practice was still back in Wisconsin. What was once the yellow pages is now basically Google and Bing; that’s how patients find us now,” he says. “So if you’re not at the top of that search list, you’re going to be way behind, and that comes back to implementing the right keywords.” To avoid any confusion, physicians who have moved their place of practice should make sure their current location is updated across their full web presence in order to help search engines associate their name with the right geographic search terms.



Navigating paid search

Don’t want to wait for local SEO to take its course? Paid search may be another option.

Pay-per-click advertising involves paying for advertising space on search engine result pages by bidding on specific keywords that potential patients might use when searching for a dermatologist. With this model, the ad buyer is only charged when someone clicks on his or her campaign.

With this particular strategy, budget can be make or break. The more popular or common the keyword, the more expensive the cost of the campaign. Without a high enough budget, practices might not see enough of a return with this strategy, especially given that not every user who clicks on the ad may become a new patient. However, on the upside, particularly for newly established practices, paid search is a quick way to drive web traffic and ensure that the physician or practice name appear on the first page of search results.



Word of mouth

While the World Wide Web can open up a wide new world in terms of advertising, sometimes basic is still best. Referrals

from current patients or colleagues remain a tried and true way of generating new patients. Aside from referrals, there are other ways to harness word of mouth to draw attention to your practice. Community investment through volunteering or events such as free skin cancer screenings can help practices make an in-person splash.

“When I first started my practice, free skin cancer screenings were the way I built my business and introduced myself to the community. For years, I did them almost weekly at health fairs, workplaces, senior centers, and pretty much everywhere they invited me,” says Dr. Santmyire-Rosenberger. “I highly recommend this to anyone trying to establish or grow their practice. I still do a few free screening events a year, and now I take my two children to help give a gift bag of samples out to

our participants. Patients love seeing us serve together as a family. Over the years, we have also utilized a variety of open house formats as well for both existing and interested patients.” (The AAD has resources to help dermatologists set up a free screening as part of its SPOTme™ program; visit www.aad.org/members/volunteer/skin-cancer-screening-program to learn more.)

Over the years Dr. Santmyire-Rosenberger’s practice has also held community events as a way to both recognize referral sources and potentially generate new ones. “This fall we did an open house that also functioned as a fundraiser for a family whose child has been battling cancer. We just had Nurses Night, and we have Cosmetologists Night and Teachers Night coming up,” she says. “These events are aimed at honoring and recognizing those in the community that refer so many patients to us.”



Traditional outlets

Given the prevalence of digital advertising and the continued strength of word-of-mouth referrals, can dermatologists still get mileage out of traditional advertising outlets? While newspaper ads and local listings may be past their prime, it is still worthwhile to invest in a strong logo and brand identity that can be carried across a range of media. “I think print advertising is an avenue that can be considered for overall branding and exposure, but you usually don’t see a strong ROI from them, so I would definitely not spend money there first,” advises Goldman Luksa.

Additionally, direct mail can be a way of targeting potential patients who live in the immediate area surrounding a practice. “When you’re opening up a new practice, I think there is some merit in letting the community know that you’re there, both in terms of potential patients as well as referring physicians,” says Goldman Luksa. Lastly, media publicity remains an effective — and free — form of advertising, by contributing to a publication via an interview or column.

At the end of the day, good advertising can be just as much about bolstering the health of your practice as it is the health of your patients. “I’ve had patients who, even with simple things like warts, were going to the Minute Clinic or their regular doctor, and by the time they finally came to see me, the warts had grown and spread, and they’d be wondering ‘why did this happen?’ It’s like well, this happened because you didn’t go see someone who was trained in treating skin conditions, and their answer to that is always, well I didn’t know,” says Dr. Bhatia. “I find that answer stunning, but at the same time maybe it’s because the marketing strategy is so geared toward cosmetics that there isn’t that general understanding of what else dermatology does. In the end if that patient awareness isn’t there, it’s going to hurt everyone.” **dw**