

Internet Effectiveness

Mayer A. Levitt, DMD

Excerpted from his Mayer's Message column in The Madow Brothers Monthly online dental newsletter

In an article that appeared in this publication a few months ago, I discussed the necessity – especially in these difficult economic times – for dentists to avail themselves of the benefits of Internet marketing. That, of course, means creating a well-designed, attractive, website that will give a potential new patient enough information about your practice, and the services provided by your practice, to perhaps pick up the telephone and call for an appointment.

The Internet is the Yellow Pages directory for the twenty-first century. Literally thousands of people in your neighborhood go on-line every day searching for services and information. The ultimate challenge is to get them to find you before they find somebody else. So let's discuss two strategies to make this happen: search engine optimization (SEO) and pay per click (PPC). Whichever strategy you choose, unless you are extremely computer literate and have hours and hours of free time, you will need to hire professional help.

What is SEO?

SEO stands for search engine optimization, and is routinely used to refer to “organic” or “natural” placements in the search engine results page (the stuff on the left hand side of the results page). It is a strategy that makes a website rank well on search engines, like Google, Yahoo, and MSN. When a web user types words into a search engine, a list of results called a SERP (search engine results page) appears. The websites listed on this page are in order of their relevance to the topic for which the user searched. A good, targeted SEO strategy helps a website rank at the top of the SERPs for specific search terms, called keywords.

How does SEO work?

Many factors contribute to a site's search engine rankings. These include but are not limited to longevity of the site, words used on the site, where words are used within a page, headings, internal links, words surrounding links, amount of content, and what we call backend optimization. The backend strategy involves the sitemap, how the content is organized, how pages are submitted to search engines, and many other technical factors. Links to the website from similar sites can help, as well. For instance, it would be good for a sleep apnea physician and a sleep apnea dentist to exchange links.

Are results immediate?

No. As previously mentioned, longevity of a website has an impact on its search engine rankings. The systems that evaluate websites are called search engine spiders, and we say they “crawl” a site to determine how to index it. For a newly optimized website, depending on how much competition exists and how competing sites are optimized, good results could take six or twelve

months although you may start to see increased traffic after just a few weeks for some of the less competitive keywords. Ranking reports reveal a site's effectiveness with particular keywords, how many visitors the site attracts, where visitors enter, and where they leave. This data helps a website company tweak an SEO strategy for optimal results.

What is PPC?

Wikipedia defines Pay Per Click as an Internet advertising model used on search engines in which advertisers pay their host only when their ad is clicked. With search engines, advertisers typically bid on keyword phrases relevant to their target market. Websites that utilize PPC ads will display an advertisement when a keyword query matches an advertiser's keyword list. Such advertisements are called sponsored links and appear adjacent to or above the organic results on the search engine results page.

It's a numbers game.

There's a requirement in doing Google AdWords advertising that you hit a certain budget every month. That's not to say that you couldn't spend \$50 and get a good patient out of it. One of the beautiful things about AdWords is that there's no minimum investment required. It will run on \$1 a day if you like. But the laws of probability start to work in your favor, the more money you allow to be spent on a daily basis. If your ad gets shown to 100 people and 2 people visit your site, you'll be very lucky to generate an actual phone call and even luckier to get a patient out of it. But if you show ads to 10,000 people and get 200 people to your site and 20 phone calls, then you'd probably be a little surprised if that didn't get you a new patient.

Any advertising campaign can generate duds, but it's almost impossible to generate 20 in a row even if you try – quality patients with money to spend always manage to sneak in there! Bottom line, spend enough to generate 20 calls. A properly strategized campaign that's well set up should generate that kind of activity for no more than \$400, so a monthly budget of \$1000 should net you 50 calls or so.

Which is better – SEO or PPC?

SEO is also known as the 'free' listings while PPC is the 'paid' listings. For the uninitiated and thrifty dentist this makes their mind up for them: SEO it is. Let's take a closer look. Now it's true that when someone clicks on your SEO listing you pay zero. But it's also true that you'll rarely be clicked on in the SEO/natural listings if you aren't on the first page of the results, and getting you to that page is what will cost you.

You will probably have to pay about \$300-1000/month to have a company host your site and position it. And unless your website is written with a certain technology that allows you to edit the site, you will also have to pay this company a fee every time they make a change or an edit or an addition to the site. You may have to sign a long-term contract (minimally 6 months) for attempting to get you to a first page position. And no SEO agency that is reputable will give you

a guarantee that you'll even make it to page one, let alone that you will actually stay there for a specific length of time. Another complicating factor is that Google, Yahoo and MSN reserve the right to change their rankings at will by introducing new algorithms. They try to make it difficult for you to get "free" advertising - they would much rather sell you a sponsored link.

But that's not even the worst news about SEO. The fact is that the first thing that your SEO agency will ask you is "what 20 keywords or search terms would you like to be on page one for?" Two things will hit you at that moment: firstly, you could guess at the best keywords but you don't really know where to begin and you certainly don't have any data; secondly, you probably wonder why it is that you're restricted to just 20 keywords when there are probably hundreds and thousands of keyword combinations that your future dental patients could be using. This is awkward for your marketing plan. You are spending money on SEO and now you have results that will start to build in 3-6 months based on a tiny fraction of the total number of search terms available that you and your agency chose based on zero local data.

PPC – much more expensive.

Contrast this scenario with that of the dentist with the PPC marketing plan. His/her PPC campaign incorporates 6000 keywords from Day one. Day one is, well, today or tomorrow – basically, as soon as you need it – and you will immediately be on page one for all those keywords for as long as you choose. No long-term contracts, immediate visibility and website visitors and, probably, immediate incoming calls from new patients. And you only pay for visits to your site – not just for being seen on page one.

In addition, Google's amazing geo tracking technology in PPC means that every searcher's location is known and your listing will be shown only to those searchers in your local area – you can even set a radius around your practice address outside of which your ad should never show. Because dentists are local businesses, this is a vital tool to help your advertising be much more focused.

My experience shows that you need to spend about \$1000/month on ads to generate 50-60 calls/month from the Internet. You also need a company to manage your campaign on almost a daily basis – changing up various introductory offers on your site for various services, monitoring telephone calls that come in to your office from the website, and changing ad copy on the sponsored links. The charge for these types of services will also run close to \$1000/month. So a pay per click program is definitely more expensive than optimizing your site to the first page with SEO.

SEO out, PPC in?

Let's go back to the initial scenario, where the dentist is faced with selecting 20 keywords for his/her SEO campaign. That choice becomes almost childishly simple when we have the data from even one month's PPC campaign. One of the wonders of the Google AdWords system is its ability to generate reports quickly and easily on any aspect of the campaign – in particular, within seconds you can isolate the 20 most popular keywords in your local area over the time that you've been advertising (you can even see which terms are growing in popularity and which

are waning). In addition, you'll already have expectations of results you'd be expecting from the campaign based on your PPC experience.

My conclusion is that if you had to choose between one or the other, a pay per click program will definitely get more potential patients to call your office than you could ever expect from an SEO campaign. But I feel that SEO is really valuable when it's done at the right time - namely, after a month or two of PPC when a lot of data is available.

It is understandable for dentists to dream of replacing a PPC campaign with an SEO campaign, thereby freeing them from the constant need to pay the Google monster. However, in the end, if a marketing program is profitable, that's all that counts. PPC and SEO can both be fabulous marketing machines for dental practices, and actually can be run together. But in order to do it right, start with PPC first.

Next month I would like to talk about marketing strategy that relates to website content. I also would like to address an extremely important issue: how to convert calls into patient visits. Why spend all of this money on programs designed to get prospective patients to call when the calls are not being handled properly by the staff at the front desk?

Mayer A. Levitt DMD, FAGD

Dr. Levitt is the president of Jodena Consulting, offering personalized business and practice management advice to the dental profession since 1989. For more information, call (401) 421-3615, email jodena@cox.net, or visit www.jodena.com