

GOING SOCIAL: A SOCIAL MEDIA PRIMER FOR AESTHETIC PRACTITIONERS

Confused by the range of social media networks? Looking for the right strategy? Here's what you need to know.

BY WENDY LEWIS

Social media plays an important role in marketing for an aesthetic practice. There are not many other ways to reach thousands of potential patients all over the world without spending a fortune on advertising and PR. However, this new way of marketing that seems to be constantly changing can be overwhelming, confusing, and downright frustrating for the novice and the veteran alike. Although social media marketing may not seem expensive at first glance since participating is free, it requires commitment—and as a practitioner, your time is your most valuable resource. In the long run, social media is a more cost-effective strategy than any traditional form of advertising. Social media marketing continues to build your reputation and bring in leads even when you're not actively building it out.

Generating positive word-of-mouth for your brand across all social media platforms is a constant challenge. As aesthetic practitioners know all too well, happy, satisfied customers are less likely to go public, say thank you, or write glowing reviews and endorsements. Whereas disgruntled patients tend to be more vocal, proactive, often tell you what they don't like, and expect an immediate response.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

The burden is on the aesthetic practitioner to identify what your happy patients love about you, what makes you stand apart from your competitors, and to figure out the most effective ways to encourage them to share their opinions with their friends and followers.

Remember that your website is your marketing mothership.

NEW COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS

Social media channels offer new ways of talking to existing and future patients online. Think of social media as essentially a network of communications channels that can be linked together in several ways. For starters, you can use social media to increase the “Know, Like, and Trust” or KLT factor of your practice. It is an effective way to build new relationships, strengthen existing relationships with colleagues, clients, media, and vendors, and let them know about what is happening in your practice. However, the most valuable way to use these channels is to focus your efforts on leading people toward making a purchase; for example, booking a consultation, scheduling a treatment, or purchasing a product from your practice.

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are the most highly trafficked social media sites. The next wave, in terms of popularity, includes Pinterest, Instagram, and Google+. You don't have to use all these platforms, but it is helpful to at least set up a profile on each. So the process is less overwhelming, learn and implement one at a time, then focus on those that have the highest return for your practice. The social media site that most of your patients are on is the one in which you should invest the most time and money.

You also must track exactly where your clicks are coming from and stay on top of your social media results on a monthly basis. Analytics are readily available for most platforms so you can continually measure the response you get.

FACEBOOK

With 1.06 billion monthly users worldwide as of January 2013, Facebook has proven to be a highly addictive connective platform that has changed the way we communicate and the way we conduct business. It has become an essential component of a marketing program, especially for small businesses, but also for global brands.

By investing some time and energy, aesthetic practices can build brand loyalty, establish the expertise of their medical staff, engage with patients on a deeper level, and drive traffic to their marketing mothership; the practice's website. For practices just starting to dabble in social media, Facebook is the place to begin. Your customized Facebook Page can add interactive features such as a shopping cart, appointment scheduling, highlighting multiple locations, and growing a subscriber base. Your page can be promoted via eblasts, Facebook ads, promoted posts, and directly through your Facebook network of fans. Content sharing also means having shared buttons on your website and blog for social media optimization purposes to encourage visitors to share your content.

A common concern of practitioners just starting to become active in social media is how to police what is posted on their Facebook Page. Facebook allows you to have as much or little control over your fan base as you select. For example, if a fan of your page posts a negative comment, the assigned Page Administrator can delete the post and ban the user from ever posting again. Derogatory posts are actually less common than one would think, and at least on Facebook, there are built-in mechanisms to manage any unsavory or controversial content.

Consumers are restless, easily bored, and short on attention span. Therefore the messages sent out on your behalf should not be solely about the practitioner or special deals and offers. To generate viral excitement, content needs to incorporate your customers, partners, staff, and anyone else who can endorse you or provide testimonials and enter the conversation. Despite the continued enthusiasm for social media, there is a constant need to innovate and diversify to keep consumers interested in what you have to say. Content should be fresh, creative, and interesting to capture the users' attention.

Since Facebook went public in May 2012, there has been an increasing pressure on Zuckerberg et al to show investors that their revenue stream has staying power. To that end, there have been numerous alterations, additional features and paid promotional tools, plus sweeping changes in the

way news feeds appear, and who actually sees your posts. A common lament from consumers is that Facebook ads clog up their mini feeds, but the same can be said of newspapers, magazines, and Google. The future of social media lies undoubtedly in acquisitions by giants of start-ups with good ideas, and paid placement opportunities for businesses. So for aesthetic practitioners this means that social media needs to be a line item in your marketing plan going forward, whether you are doing it yourself in-house or engaging a consultant to manage it for you off-site.

TWITTER

The Twitter of today is quite different than the Twitter of a few years ago, with both good and bad changes for aesthetic practices. For example, Twitter has been a breeding ground for spammers and hackers, giving rise to new attention to its security practices. Twitter also seems to have lost some of its juice due to the newer entries into the social media scene that have picked up traction: Pinterest and Instagram.

However, Twitter's real value lies in the mobile space, where it is seeing growth in advertising campaigns and increasing its reach. Twitter is an entirely portable form of communication, even more than Facebook, largely because the posts are only 140 characters, and therefore simpler to do on the go. Users can tweet through their computers, tablets, or mobile phones from almost anywhere. Twitter also has emerged as a strong leader among social media platforms in terms of stimulating conversations about current events, pop culture, and brands. Users turn to Twitter when looking to speak directly to a brand or find out about other people's experience with a brand. It also is used as a default customer service and complaint bureau.

Practitioners also can benefit from using Twitter to announce milestones, such as an anniversary or a new office opening, and to get the word out about deals, open-house events, and media appearances. It also drives followers to your website, Facebook page, YouTube channel, and blog when linked back to these sources. Getting started on Twitter takes literally minutes and with the new options for customization, you can brand your Twitter easily. The least time-consuming strategy is to link your Twitter to your Facebook Page so that posts are automatically shared with Twitter. Thus, if you are not ready to dedicate a lot of time to tweeting, your Facebook posts will serve as content to at least keep it going until you can focus on this channel more seriously.

Twitter is like a virtual word-of-mouth that allows users to share their immediate thoughts on people and places, including doctors and treatments. We all know that word-of-mouth is the most trusted form of advertising because

the person providing the recommendation or shout out, has used the service or product and is speaking from personal experience, which is hopefully unpaid. For aesthetic practitioners, interacting with clients via Twitter can allow positive impressions to be built and shared and brand ambassadors to be developed. By prompting users to retweet your tweets and share their favorable opinions with their followers, it may ultimately lead to an increase in traffic and revenue.

YOUTUBE

YouTube, owned by Google, gets over one billion unique visitors monthly and is all about original video content. The operative word being “original.” To get started on YouTube, you need to create a channel for your practice and then upload video content. This content may take the form of educational videos, commentary about a procedure or treatment, footage of an actual procedure, or patient testimonials. Many practitioners tape a consultation with a patient or an open house seminar for YouTube. The video camera on your phone may be good enough quality for this purpose to keep costs down.

The main challenge with YouTube is to create original video content to populate your channel. YouTube only allows you to post original videos or ones you have the rights or permission to use, which does not include clips from network television shows. Uploading materials is fast and simple once the clip is ready to go. As with other social networks, YouTube can be formatted to allow all new videos added to be posted on Twitter automatically.

PINTEREST

Pinterest is considered the fastest growing social media outlet ever, and it seems to have come out of nowhere. As of February 2013, it has 48.7 million users. “Pinning” is one of the hottest social media trends that allows users to share and curate ideas by “pinning” images or videos to their pinboards. Users and fellow pinners can then choose to follow your boards on various consumer-friendly topics, such as body shaping, skin resurfacing, or acne skincare.

Pinterest can engage consumers with images of your practice, including products and treatments, and offer up a more personal look at the doctors, staff, and mission. For example, you can create a Medical Team board and include a photo and bio for each person, and feature photos of events you have participated in or the doctor’s personal picks for skincare products. Pinterest skews largely female (80 percent of users are women, 50 percent of users have children), and therefore users are very interested in knowing interesting and unique insider facts. It is like being a member in a private club, and the content should take on a more personal and entertaining tone than other platforms. Staying fresh and continually pinning, re-pinning, following, and refreshing pinboards is important to keep your followers engaged.

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INSTAGRAM

Instagram has become so popular that Facebook, who bought it for a cool billion dollars, literally considers it a key competitor. It claims 100 million monthly active users uploading 40 million photos per day. It basically provides a platform to change, personalize, and share photos taken with your phone. It allows you to enhance colors, add filters or a frame, and to share photos with other Instagram users and on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

The benefit of Instagram is that it is the most important real-time photosharing platform, despite many other me-too programs. Like Twitter, the way to get traction on Instagram is through hashtags; for example, #ASAPS2013 or #xyzaesthetics. Instagram skews towards a younger user, therefore, it is not really appropriate for invasive cosmetic procedures or marketing your facelift clinic. Consider it to be more effective as a platform for talking about beauty products, cosmetics, and skincare, as well as places, events, and travel content.

As with Pinterest, to become active on Instagram you have to follow other users, like their photos, and share their content. The ratio of getting people to follow you back on Pinterest and Instagram seems to be about where Twitter was in around 2008, which is rather high. These platforms are still in their infancy in social media terms, but the time to develop a presence is now. For aesthetic practitioners, pinning and instagramming should be a secondary rather than primary focus.

GOOGLE+

Google + is Google’s own attempt to go social. Having your practice on Google+ is more about SEO value than reaching patients or engagement. It claims to have over 235 million active users, but don’t be surprised if not too many of them are actually people you know. If your patients or targets are mostly male, Google+ may be a good fit for you because about two-thirds of Google+ users are male.

Google+ is composed of “Circles,” similar to networks, so that you can share various types of information to specific circles. For example, you may have circles divided into friends, family, colleagues, staff, vendors, etc. You can invite users to join your circles, although they can add you without

you adding them back. At this time, Google+ serves more value as a platform to enhance a practice's search results and for that purpose alone, it is important to be there.

TIME MANAGEMENT

The most effective time devoted to social media should be spent responding to and engaging with others. If you are not engaging with people, you are not really getting the marketing value out of your time. You can automate content being sent out over social media platforms, schedule status updates in advance, program tweets to go out at specified times, and more. But if you use these platforms solely for streaming content in a robotic fashion, you are missing the real point of the social aspect of social media.

TOP OF FORM

It is much better to be on your platforms of choice in frequent bursts than to put in an hour or two randomly throughout the week. Key time savers are the ability to preschedule status updates and tools that can update multiple social media properties at once. Be careful not to utilize terminology that is specific to only one or two social networks. For example, it can be confusing to post a status update on Facebook that uses hashtags that are specific to Twitter and Instagram. If you are posting across networks, make sure your message works across all the different social media sites that you are posting to.

You may begin by assigning a staff member to assist with day-to-day social media marketing activities, but in most busy practices, that will not be sufficient to keep it going longterm. If someone is going to be interfacing with your patients and colleagues and prospects, they need to understand the nuances of an aesthetics practice to be effective and to stay out of trouble. At some point, it will be necessary to bring in the right team to create a social media marketing strategy and execute it properly.

Lastly, it is critical to constantly link back to your website by posting your URL on Twitter, Facebook, etc. to drive people back to your website so your activities are not just purely conversational. Thus when you are Tweeting, or Facebooking, or blogging, you should be continually sending people back to your site where you can capture their email address in your own database. Social media platforms may come and go and waiver in popularity, but your email lists are marketing gold. ■



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