

Digital marketing in dentistry: Impacts and challenges

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10.56238/rcsv14n3-008

ABSTRACT

The exponential growth of the internet has boosted the development of social networks, such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Social media have become essential for marketing strategies, as they cover communications promoted by companies or service providers, who use digital resources to promote their activities. Dental surgeons, as service providers, are inserted in this context, as it is an important tool for health promotion. The search for dental aesthetic procedures, influenced by the relationship between aesthetics and self-esteem, highlights the importance of the dissemination of professionals in this field. Consequently, dental offices are now seen as enterprises, requiring marketing strategies to attract and retain patients. Thus, digital marketing emerges as a powerful tool in this scenario, allowing the dissemination of knowledge and services in an easy way. However, the content published on social networks may diverge from the Dental Code of Ethics, leading to unrealistic expectations on the part of patients or even to the commodification of the profession. It is essential for dental surgeons to be familiar with the Code of Ethics to ensure consistent and safe practice. This article aims to analyze the impact of digital marketing on the dissemination of dental work, considering its benefits and potential risks to patients.

Keywords: Digital marketing, Social networks, Dentistry.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in internet users has resulted in the development of media and social networks. The media are means or instruments of communication and facilitate contact between individuals, establishing interpersonal relationships. Currently, the most popular are Facebook (2006), Youtube (2005), X (formerly Twitter – 2006), WhatsApp (2009) and Instagram (2011), with Brazil being the leader in access time in Latin America.¹

According to the ICT Domiciles 2023 survey, by the Regional Center for Studies for the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br), in 2023, 84% of Brazilians have access to the internet. Therefore, social networks are an essential communication channel for the success of marketing campaigns by companies, entrepreneurs, and service providers. And based on the Brazilian Consumer Protection Code, dental surgeons are service providers, so they have a contract with their patients, even if not documented in writing.

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With the growth of interest in cosmetic dentistry, including orofacial harmonization, there was a need for dentists to publicize their work and their clinics within this context. Aesthetic satisfaction is related to self-esteem, which interferes with quality of life and is one of the pillars of health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).²

In this sense, over the years and the advancement of technology, it is possible to realize the need for the dental office to be seen as an enterprise and, thus, invest in ways to attract and retain patients. In this way, there is the growth of the company and, consequently, the delivery of quality care for patients based on the concern for the experience of those who will enjoy the service. With this, marketing plays an important role, being used mainly with the advent of the internet, and digital marketing can be widely used to achieve these goals. Digital media can be a tool to attract and keep patients, through the dissemination of knowledge and services, creating facilitated communication between potential clients and the office.³

However, the content published on social networks may not be in accordance with the Dental Code of Ethics, generating unrealistic expectations in patients or commodifying and trivializing the profession. In addition, on social networks, it is possible to create a persona and promote titles, often unrealistic or illusory, to generate more value and delight patients. Thus, there must be greater control both by those who publish advertising actions, as well as by the inspection and regulatory bodies of the professional practice of Dentistry. It is of utmost importance that dentists are aware of the content of the Code of Ethics in relation to advertising and marketing tools for their own benefit, in order to work coherently and safely.⁴

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze how digital marketing can be an important tool for disseminating the work of dental health professionals, also considering its disadvantages or possible risks to patients.

METHODOLOGY

This study consists of a descriptive literature review, carried out through the search of scientific articles in the PubMed, Scielo and Google Scholar databases, covering the years 2014 to 2024. The descriptors "dentistry", "social media", "digital marketing" and "social networks" were used, the first being related to the others. At the end of the research, articles that met the requirements for the elaboration of the work were selected. These are the relationship with the proposed theme and studies with a basis corroborating and discussing the subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ritossa (2009) describes personal marketing as a set of planned actions that aim to achieve professional and personal success. Its strategy consists of spreading the best version of ourselves. The personal image is a business card, so people end up looking for an aesthetic standard, as well as looking for professionals who have a good presentation.⁵ According to Palmeira (2014), appearance is an important factor in the job market and between two candidates with equivalent qualifications, the vacancy will go to the one who is better presentable.⁶

In the twenty-first century, social media, especially WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Tik Tok have become the central platform for communication, information, and advertising. The dissemination of information on social networks has also allowed patients to acquire knowledge in the health area, with an increase in the need for its use in dentistry for a better interaction between professionals and patients, and it is also a means of attracting the latter.⁷ Instagram, especially, is widely used as an online showcase. In this way, digital marketing is related to communications conveyed by a company or service provider, which use digital media to publicize their activities.

Social networks have become tools for establishing interpersonal relationships and are interactive platforms that have a variety of additional services. Thus, they are important instruments for opinion formation and have become efficient for health promotion and marketing strategies. However, a major challenge is to ensure the regulation of the use of social media, especially in professional spheres, as it has a libertarian or even anarchist characteristic.¹

DENTAL CODE OF ETHICS

In 2019, Resolution 196/2019 amended the Dentistry Code of Ethics, allowing the publication of a diagnosis and treatment conclusion photo, as long as it contains the patient's prior authorization.⁸ Thus, social networks have become means of dissemination, expression and repercussion of information about Dentistry.

However, in order for the before and after treatments photos to be comparable, they should ideally be with the same lighting and position. In addition, care must also be taken not to have possible distortions of the cell phone camera or change in position and light between the photos, so that it does not generate the impression of unrealistic results and unrealistic expectations of patients.

The Dental Code of Ethics also lists as infractions: advertising and misleading advertising, offering free work with the intention of self-promotion, advertising professional services as a raffle prize, self-promotion with titles, qualifications and specialties that the professional does not have,

dissemination of techniques or therapies not scientifically proven, among other practices that may generate a lack of responsibility and professional trivialization.⁹

For the dissemination of images and videos, the name of the professional and his registration number must be included in the publications and on his social networks. In addition, images or videos that show the course and/or performance of procedures are also prohibited, as well as expressions that characterize sensationalism, self-promotion, unfair competition, promise of results or commercialization of the profession.

Although the legal texts of dentistry do not impose the obligation to explicitly indicate that this is a merely illustrative case, it is recommended to include this information in publications to emphasize the importance of clarifying to the patient that the results achieved are specific to the case in question. This is due to the variation in individual biological conditions, the complexity of rehabilitation, the subjectivity of the satisfactory aesthetic result, and the costs associated with the type of treatment.¹⁰

DISCUSSION

According to the Federal Council of Dentistry, the ratio between dentists and the population has advanced so that 20% of the global total of dental surgeons are Brazilian. The latest data, from 2022, considered a total population of 212.6 million, translating into 570 inhabitants/dental surgeon. The WHO, however, does not recommend the ratio of 1,500 fewer inhabitants per dentist. Thus, the dental market is recognized for its saturation and intense competition, suggesting a review of the criteria by the Ministry of Education for the creation of new courses and a reduction in undergraduate vacancies in areas with a high density of professionals. Dentists who are entering the job market find it more difficult in the profession than previous generations.¹¹

Due to the absence of planning and technical criteria in the opening of new educational institutions, combined with the lack of effective control, the dental sector faces a paradoxical scenario. In some regions, there is an overabundance of dental surgeons, while in others the presence of these professionals is scarce. This disparity contributes to unfair competition, misuse of advertising, and depreciation of dental procedures. There are frequent cases that show deficiencies in ethical, legal, marketing and management training applied to dentistry. Unfortunately, we cannot ignore the possibility of character flaws or bad faith.¹

CONCLUSION

Therefore, social media have a great impact on dentistry, as they provide an easy interaction between professionals and patients, allowing the dissemination of their work, being a tool for health

promotion and attracting new patients. However, it is important to raise awareness among dental surgeons in relation to the Dental Code of Ethics, so as not to devalue the profession or generate unrealistic expectations in patients. In addition, patients should also seek out the professionals they find through social networks, investigating their qualifications and titles, so that they do not get carried away by illusory marketing. Therefore, social media can be a powerful tool for disseminating professionals and educating patients, but it must be done with caution, due to the ethical infractions that may occur.

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