

# WHEN YOUR PATIENT GOOGLES YOU

Why I hired an Internet marketing team.

BY SOMDUPT PRASAD, MS, FRCS(Ed), FRCOPHTH, FACS



The early days in a new ophthalmic practice are both exciting and stressful. You are busy hiring staff, making sure the premises are up to the mark to provide a good patient experience, composing lists of equipment you want to purchase, lining up the best software support for managing your practice, and the list goes on. Alternatively, maybe you have acquired practice privileges in a private hospital where much of this is taken care of for you. Still, you have to change some things so that you can provide your patients with the standard of care they expect and negotiate for the equipment you still need to purchase.

While you are doing these things, you are also presumably writing to your potential referral base—the general practitioners, optometrists, and ophthalmologists who may want to access your subspecialty expertise and other doctors from specialties who might refer to you—advising them about your areas of expertise and availability.

Meanwhile, as you are trying to keep all these balls in

the air, both finances and time are often in short supply at this early stage of your practice. The last thing you want is to have something else to do. But remember, the most important thing to make your practice successful is a steady stream of patients.

The old methods of building your patient base still work: referrals from other doctors and health care professionals and recommendations from people you are treating or have treated. But these methods need to reach a critical mass before they start bringing you a steady stream of new patients.

How do you jump-start this flow?

## HELPING PATIENTS FIND YOU

Most people today are used to looking things up on the Internet to fill many of their needs, whether they want to buy new windows, book a holiday, or see a doctor. This is true to such an extent that *to google* has become a verb, named after the popular Internet search engine.

Today's patients use the Internet to self-diagnose and to research medical conditions, surgical procedures, and

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Googoooooooooooooole >  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10      Next

Figure 1. Search result from Google.co.uk for *laser eye surgery Derby*.

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About 55,900 results (0.43 seconds)

A Mr Rohit Sharma  
 Ophthalmologist  
 C/O Nuffield Hospital, Rykneild Rd  
 Website   Directions

B Mr Rohit Sharma  
 Ophthalmologist  
 C/O Derby Skin Laser and Cosmetic Clinic, 2 Vernon Street  
 Opens at 14:00  
 Website   Directions

C D&A  
 Optician - intu Derby  
 5 Traffic St - 0345 125 3758  
 Open until 17:30  
 Website   Directions

Figure 2. Search result from Google.co.uk for *Ophthalmologist in Derby*.



“As you are trying to keep all these balls in the air, both finances and time are often in short supply at this early stage of your practice. The last thing you want is to have something else to do. A good SEO team will ensure that your site is built—and constantly tweaked ... so that your site climbs the rankings quickly and soon appears at or near the top of the first page of results for relevant searches.

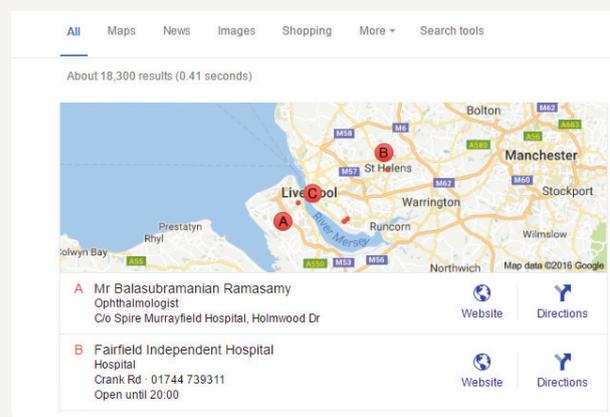


Figure 3. Search result from Google.co.uk for *Ophthalmologist in Merseyside*.

treatment options. Although these home research efforts help to empower them, your patients should have this information presented to them by you, their treating physician, rather than by some arbitrarily chosen website. One of the best investments I made early on in my new practice was to invest in professional Internet marketing.

A new practitioner could set up a free or do-it-yourself website that lists his or her services and expertise, or even a flashy website that looks attractive, but if that site does not appear on the first page of Google search results when a potential patient searches for a relevant term—say, *laser eye surgery Derby* (Figure 1), *Ophthalmologist in Derby* (Figure 2), or *Ophthalmologist in Merseyside* (Figure 3) as examples—then that has been simply wasted effort. If you are an ophthalmologist practicing in Derby, United Kingdom, or Merseyside, United Kingdom and these searches do not bring your website up, then it is merely a brochure that has little chance of being read.

Medical practice marketing is a specialized job, constrained by regulation (varying country by country) that prohibits or limits overt advertising by health care professionals. Moreover, modern day media marketing tactics that may work for some businesses do not necessarily convey the professionalism and trust that a physician or surgeon wants to portray to his or her patients. The answer lies in finding a professional team that is familiar with this field to handle the task.

An important component of Internet marketing is search engine optimization (SEO). A good SEO team will ensure that your site is built—and constantly tweaked—to satisfy all the criteria and algorithms laid out by Google, so that your site climbs the rankings quickly and appears at or near the top of the first page of results for relevant searches. The team will also ensure that your Internet presence does not breach the UK General Medical Council or other equivalent national regulations and guidelines.

Once your site starts appearing among the top results of searches, your viewership will increase, and some of these views will convert into new consultations. I hardly have a clinic these days that does not include a few referrals generated from the Internet. Figures 1 through 3 show examples of what can be achieved by a professional team within a 3-month period of starting work for a client.

Hiring a team of professionals with a track record in Internet marketing is the best investment I made when I set up my new practice just 2 years ago. I wish I had known this when I started in my first private practice in 2001.

### PERSONALIZE YOUR PRACTICE

Your online presence personalizes your practice, makes you more accessible and relatable, and helps to drive new  
(Continued on page 72)



## AT A GLANCE

- Medical practice marketing is a specialized job, constrained by regulation that prohibits or limits overt advertising by health care professionals.
- The Internet marketing team should handle social media, focusing on value over the volume of information shared.
- A practice's online presence helps to not only personalize the practice, but it also helps to make the practice more accessible and relatable and to drive new patients to the practice.

*(Continued from page 60)*

patients to you. A good website will give patients the opportunity to post reviews, letting them know that you care and want their feedback. Even negative feedback can be useful if you use it to improve your consulting technique, your staff's customer service, or your office's policies and procedures.

The Internet marketing team should also handle social media for you, as these are enormously important platforms that should not be ignored. Michael Salzhauer, MD, a cosmetic surgeon in Bal Harbour, Florida, became an Internet sensation as the first doctor to use the social media platform Snapchat to draw more than 821,000 people to follow him and view the medical procedures he performs on his clients.

Whatever platform you choose, focus on value over the volume of information you share. The objective is to provide your patients with information that is useful and interesting. Be careful not to disclose any confidential information about patients online. Never discuss medical matters directly with a patient online, but post general information about diseases and conditions. Anecdotes are useful to make you more visible online, as a rule of thumb, as long as there are no identifiable patient data in your posts. Do not answer patient queries directly, except to say something like, "Thank you, and please book an appointment where we can discuss your condition in confidence."

There is no reason not to use social media for professional purposes. Writing short posts about something newsworthy or educational about yourself, your specialty, or more general medical issues helps you stay relevant. Adding this information to your website can help improve your search ratings and get your message out.

Search engines tend to penalize plagiarism, so direct copying is not a good idea. Your SEO team should be able to check for this and optimize the content before posting it.

## CONCLUSION

Get a professional team to handle your Internet marketing, create a strategy with your team, and set goals that you can achieve with realistic deadlines. Accomplish these three tasks, and you will be well on your way to getting new referrals regularly from your Internet marketing. As your patient flow grows, you will be able to invest in all the fancy equipment you need to further improve your clinical results, enhancing your practice even more. ■

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