

There are a myriad of ways for orthodontists to promote their practices online, and most Internet marketing experts would agree that taking a multi-faceted approach is a good idea.

However, if budget constraints drive the need to take a more conservative approach and marketing dollars can be spent in just one area, that area should be search engine optimization (SEO).

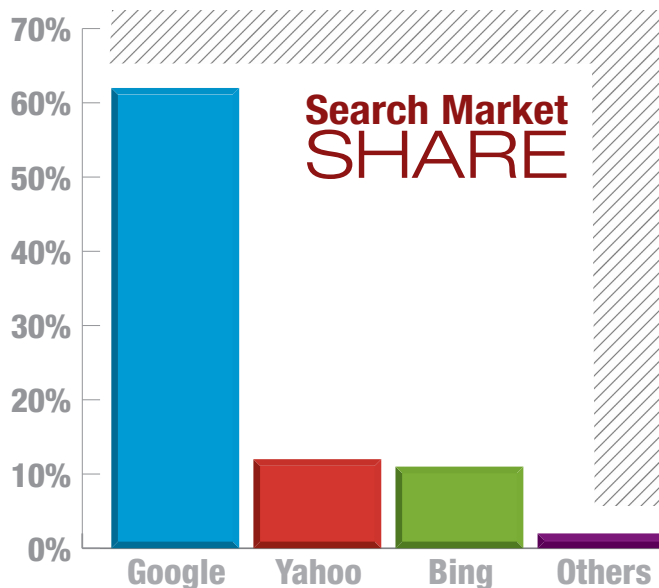
SEO is the term used to describe how companies maximize the number of visitors to a Web site by getting that site to rank high on organic search results.

The heaviest focus ought to be on organic SEO. This refers to the search results Google shows beneath and to the left of the Google “Ads” listings on its search results pages. Orthodontists must have a strong presence on Google when potential patients search for providers in their area.

Robert Donovan, administrator of Las Vegas, Nevada orthodontist Dr. David Alpan’s practice, views SEO as a much-needed function of Internet marketing. “If you’re not on the first page of Google, you’re nowhere,” Donovan says. “It’s like having a billboard in the desert; you might have a Web site, it might be attractive, but what good will it do you if no one sees it?”

Given the difficult economic climate in Las Vegas, not embarking on an SEO campaign simply wasn’t an option for Alpan, Donovan says. “Had we chosen to not do that, it wouldn’t have been good for anybody,” he says. “In tough economic times, you have to gear up your marketing.”

In July, Alpan’s site received 1,385 visitors coming from Google organic search alone.



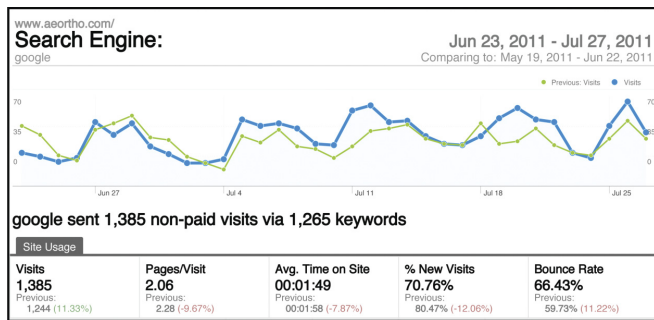
Another reason for orthodontists to consider SEO over other online advertising formats when money is tight is although economical opportunities to advertise via Facebook advertisements and Google pay-per-click ads abound, people still want to feel like they are driving their decisions. That means while an advertisement might appear under the sponsored link headings when a person performs a Google search for an orthodontist in their area, many potential patients are prone to click on the organic search results instead. People are quite savvy about advertisements these days, so there is a segment of the population who will never click on an advertisement.



by Ali Husayni and Lorrie Delk Walker

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The key to getting that population segment to click through to an orthodontist's Web site is making sure Google looks upon those sites favorably and ranks them high on search results.

It's as simple as this: if Google thinks a site is good, that site is going to be number one on search results. Potential patients perceive an orthodontist to be the best if Google ranks their site number one on its search engine and the site has many positive reviews, both of which can easily be accomplished with the help of a professional SEO company.

Following is some helpful information on how Internet marketing firms can help orthodontists achieve SEO results that will generate traffic to their site and result in getting new patients.

Develop Keywords

Most clients have some idea regarding the keywords they want associated with their business. For example, an orthodontist in Biloxi, Mississippi knows she wants her site to appear prominently in Google's organic search results when someone searches for "Biloxi, MS orthodontist."

An Internet marketer understands people also sometimes search for similar variations of those keywords, such as "orthodontist Biloxi, MS" and "Biloxi, MS orthodontists" or just simply, "Invisalign."

Professional Internet marketers work with clients to brainstorm keyword phrases, and they conduct research to get a comprehensive list of commonly searched for words. They also look at their clients' competitors to determine the types of keywords the competition is using.

From there begins the process of reviewing, categorizing and comparing search volume and competitiveness of the main keywords. Finally, a client's keyword phrases are prioritized based on relevance and propensity to drive traffic and sales.

Orthodontics keywords are commonly known to the SEO companies that specialize in helping these practices. So, working with an orthodontics marketing company from the beginning will be an advantage for the practice.

Optimize

A variety of work is done to an orthodontist's site when it is optimized. A sitemap.xml file is created and submitted to Google Webmaster Tools, and the orthodontist's HTML sitemap page is created and/or updated.

A quality Internet marketer will also make sure that search engines are not blocked through no-index meta-tags, robots.txt files, or anything else that prevents search engines from accessing and indexing a Web site.

Google frowns upon duplicate content, so any content on an orthodontist's site that isn't original should be removed and replaced with fresh, original content. Duplicate content can be a common problem for orthodontists who use some Internet marketing firms that offer standardized content or template Web sites for clients.

Using Invisalign as an example, if the information about Invisalign that is on an Erie, Pennsylvania orthodontist's Web site is an exact information that appears on 50 other orthodontists' Web sites throughout the country, that content will do the Erie orthodontist absolutely no good in terms of SEO effort, and could even cause Google to remove his site from its index.

Eagan, Minnesota orthodontist Dr. Jennifer Eisenhuth tried two large dental Internet marketing firms for optimization prior to switching to a boutique SEO provider. "We found that the canned content basically keeps you in pace with your competitors," said Peter Eisenhuth, the practice's business administrator. "Most orthodontists are using the same large companies, and when we switched to a smaller boutique SEO provider, they customized our site's content."

He quickly saw improvements in organic search outcomes as a result because the content was customized to include the practice's specific keywords. "Without our customized content being replicated on other orthodontists' Web sites, it allowed us to separate ourselves from the pack," Eisenhuth said.

It has been Eisenhuth's observation that the bulk of orthodontic practices in his market who participate in SEO use the same companies. "Doing so is a conflict of interest on the SEO providers' part, because they really can't differentiate between clients in the same market if they're all paying the fees for services," he said. "How can a company charge you a fee for enhancing your search engine ranking above your competitors when they're currently working for your competitors?"

There are many orthodontists in search of a turnkey provider that offers everything from Web site design and SEO to patient reminder software.



Eisenhuth said the practice gained better results by finding a firm that concentrated its efforts strictly on SEO. Firms that don't focus specifically on SEO, but offer a wide variety of marketing services to orthodontists instead are similar. You don't get the customer service Donovan says. "They don't focus on what they promise."

Donovan recommends marketing a practice's

Web site through SEO because the price

per lead is significantly less than it is with news-

paper or Yellow Pages advertisements.

Build Quality Links

Link building is imperative to the overall SEO process, because generating quality links back to the orthodontist's Web site is what Google uses to identify a Web site as "more important" than the rest and consequently rank it at the top.

Jolina Pettice, a senior account manager with TopRank Online Marketing, has been quoted as saying that "inbound links are like electricity for search visibility." Quality links to an orthodontist's site can be achieved by developing original content, partnering with other marketing experts, professional publications of articles and press releases and often through promotion via social networks.

Think Socially

Social media outlets such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo and now Google Plus offer more outlets for orthodontists to share their information with potential patients. The benefits of posting items such as videos, articles and press releases to these sites are that doing so generates quality links back to an orthodontist's site.

Because millions of people are active in social media circles, posting items through these outlets creates a number of opportunities for the information to be promoted by others when they choose to share it with their friends.

Google Places

Orthodontists need to be found by potential patients locally. This means Google Places is another must-have in an orthodontist's marketing toolbox.

An Invisalign provider in Boston, Massachusetts needs to be optimized on Google Places for that city because it will help him appear prominently in search results when people in Boston Google "Invisalign provider."

Google Places is connected to SEO, but there are some deliberate steps that are required to achieve the desired rankings.

A Word About Google

Optimizing Web sites for Google searches is the most important goal for SEO, and the proof is in the user statistics.

March data from comScore revealed that almost two-thirds of all domestic searches are performed using Google's search engine, according to an April article on Wired.com.¹ Yahoo! claims less than 16 percent of the search market, while Bing claims less than 14 percent.

In terms of SEO, Google has the strictest guidelines for organic search rankings. But the effort an orthodontist puts into achieving good organic search results on Google automatically helps improve ranking results on all of the other search engines.

With a seemingly bottomless well of Internet marketing tools at orthodontists' disposal these days, it's best to choose wisely. Keenly spending marketing dollars on a quality SEO provider today will generate positive results now and in the future.

Donovan recommends marketing a practice's Web site through SEO because the price per lead is significantly less than it is with newspaper or Yellow Pages advertisements. "And I don't know anyone who looks in the Yellow Pages anymore," he says.

Eisenhuth offered this advice to orthodontists considering whether to begin an SEO campaign: "Work with someone dedicated to boosting your business within your market above your competitors." Ethically, a company can't do that if it doesn't limit its clients to one or two per market. "Consumers need to be cautious," he said. "If the goal is to outrank competitors who use SEO firms, it is in your best interest not to seek those services from the same company that your competitors are using." ■

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1. <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/04/google-still-pulling-ahead-in-search-according-to-new-comscore-numbers/>

Authors' Bios

Ali Husayni has worked in the SEO field since 2003. He founded Master Google in 2004 with the focus of helping clients rank at the top of Google's organic search results. His company has helped hundreds of clients increase site traffic and revenues through better exposure on Google.

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