



Digital Marketing in Orthodontics: Linking Bits, Bytes, and Bites.

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction: The spectrum of marketing has encompassed the “word of mouth” approach in its infancy, and now, has embraced multifaceted avenues. The core of this dynamic changes is held by digitalization, and orthodontic marketing is absolutely no exception to this. Digital era, an idea of the components of the spectrum of digital technologies and their effective utilization has opened up new dimensions to commence, improvise and maintain the growth of an orthodontic practice. According to the American Marketing Association, digital marketing refers to “the activities, practices, and processes that use electronic and digital communication tools to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for customers, business partners, and society at large. Orthodontic treatment possesses a through diagnosis and treatment planning as its building block. Clinical experience and judgement form the core factors in patient’s treatment, the latter being categorized into preventive, interceptive and corrective orthodontics. Considering the present scenario, the competitive nature of the orthodontic field underscores the requirement of a rock-solid digital marketing strategy. This change permits orthodontists to differentiate themselves by showcasing their services, credentials, and patient-centric approaches. This competitive edge is integral in a market and considering that information is imparted to a larger audience, and there is easy accessibility to the healthcare providers, digital marketing, in a way, is a boon to Orthodontics. This article provides an insight into what digital marketing in Orthodontics is and how it can be leveraged for betterment and growth of a practice.

1. Introduction

The marketing landscape is ever dynamic, transgressing from implementing conventional approaches to exploring the digitalization strategies. Digitalization has opened up avenues to innumerable options and a whole different world, which when combined with the conventional approaches, helps grow the orthodontic fraternity’s outreach to patients and knowledge. The “word-of-mouth” referral^[1] strategy has now become obsolete with the bracket of digital marketing widening out. Patients are resorting to the internet for assimilating necessary details prior to choosing an orthodontist for their treatment. The success mantra to attracting patients, on the orthodontic team’s part, is all about utilizing marketing strategies and the various factors involved in it. This being said, understanding key principles & intricacies and application of digital marketing is germane to the practice’s growth. This article provides

an insight to the same and expresses its relevance in the field of orthodontics.

2. What is digital marketing?

Marketing, according to the Chartered Institute of Marketing,^[2] is “the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably.” It highlights the focus of marketing on the customer plus at the same time implies a need to link to various business operations to achieve this profitability. According to the American Marketing Association, digital marketing refers to “the activities, practices, and processes that use electronic and digital communication tools to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for customers, business partners, and society at large.”^[3] As defined by Philip Kotler, a famous marketing expert, digital marketing is “the use of digital channels [such as the web, email, social media, and search engines] to interact with customers as they go through their purchase journey or



when they seek relevant information." Thus, it connotes that this is a marketing strategy that implements digital media or the internet to create, communicate and to deliver messages to customers and potential customers^[3]

3. Goals of digital marketing^[3]

The process of digital marketing aims at accomplishing the following targets:

1. It captures attention of the customers instantly by utilizing the widespread adoption of technology and the internet in society.
2. Digital tools, for example- websites, email, social media and search engines are media to interact with customers, comprehend their needs and efficiently bridging the two entities.

To highlight from the vantage point of philosophy, digital marketing is very much an endeavour to provide greater access to healthcare services, orthodontic treatment being no exception. This outlook is based on the notion that every individual has the right to access information and quality dental care, and this mode of marketing plays a pivotal role in materializing the aforesaid concept. This renders it as a business strategy combined with ethical and significant approach towards community welfare, even ranging beyond specific geographical boundaries.

4. Digital footprint

Also known as the "digital shadow" it is the aggregate of the data derived from the digitally traceable behaviour and online presence associated with an individual.^[4] Digital footprints are the product of active participation through content production and sharing as well as the ones generated by algorithms and by other internet users. These are the sum of the data produced by active and passive forms of participation^[5,6] Active digital footprint is the personal data made accessible online through deliberate posting or sharing of information by the user. The more content contributed to the public or semi-public corners of the web, the more the growth of the active digital footprint.^[7] On the other hand, passive digital footprint is the personal data made accessible online with no deliberate intervention from an individual. These concepts are essential to understand since internet marketing strategies and practice growth, eventually are based on reputation marketing and branding of business name.^[1]

Website: In the dental industry, where trust and credibility are of the paramount importance, orthodontic website has to wear many hats; it must provide accessible information, reassure patients, and present an overall clean and professional image. It all reflects the level of care prospective patients can expect from its services.

The website forms the backbone of the practice's internet presence. Priorities in designing should include:

1. good format of representation
2. engaging details, for attracting potential patients
3. an easy to navigate search engine optimized website.

With increasing demand of data and population utilizing it, is now a necessity for all websites to be easily viewed on a mobile device. Answering this demand is the development of a responsive website that can also be accessed via cellular phones.

A responsive website design^[1] can automatically adjust its layout to properly fit all devices including smartphones, tablets, laptops and more. This leads the orthodontists to be confident that their website is easy to navigate and viewable on any internet capable device. Having a responsive website design not only resolves the question of mobile capability, it also eases out site maintenance and updating. The underlying process is by eliminating the need for multiple versions of one website, thus eliminating a separate mobile site.

The process of ideating and creating the way a website will look and feel, is the first part of creating a website. It is the stage where creative ideas, branding and visual appeal are organized. For an effective website, it is important to first clearly define the website's purpose and goals. It's a requirement to know the target audience. Defining the website's objectives^[8] necessitates knowing the intricacies of its existence. Keeping it so and of a high-quality imparts a sense of professionalism and credibility, which can reassure a patient that they are looking at a reputable and trustworthy clinic for their dental needs.

Content is the king and should be reached on and well planned out.^[8]

Social media: Social media is a platform for networking through various portals- the sharing of images, creation of video content, chat functions and more. It is defined as online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, experiences and perspectives with each other.^[1] These websites allow people to have a dialogue with their



friends, family and other people in a global environment. As a result millions of people have started communicating through social media websites. According to Castells in "The Power of Identity,"^[9] social media serves not only as a means of interpersonal communication but has also evolved into a commercial transaction space. This development might be caused by users' belief that social media is an effective platform for introducing and promoting products or brands on a broader scale.^[10] Instagram, Facebook, X and YouTube are widely used platforms. There are many factors which come into the picture while patients choose their orthodontic clinic. Professional credibility forms a prime one. As far as communication through social media is concerned, characteristics suggestive of credibility can augment the appearance of professionalism and thus strengthen patients' trust in professionals. Although images alone partly suffice to attest to the credibility of a health professional, Instagram is a predominantly visual social media platform, as the inclusion of text is optional. The posted images impart a significant amount of information to users. Evaluating the public's perception of professionalism and credibility is important for the development of guidelines regarding professionalism in digital media. It is also integral for encouraging best-use practices for social media. Also, the other consideration is how efficiently the orthodontists bridge the gap between what they desire to share and how much the target audience comprehends. To set an example, the use of technical terms in orthodontics is well received by the professionals who are into orthodontics compared to laymen & professionals from other fields. It can be explained by the fact that individuals who have experience with the dental field have a better understanding of the technical aspects of treatments and can better relate them to the image of a professional with probable skills and competence.^[11] Social media is also emerging as an important and powerful reputation management tool. As per Edwards et al., the top factor in the selection of an orthodontist was his or her good reputation.^[12] Despite the many potential advantages of social media to support treatment, including information provision, patient engagement and the ability to potentially improve patient outcomes, there are a number of potential challenges.^[13] First, there is a rapid proliferation of the availability of social media sites, making it increasingly challenging for patients and health

professionals to identify high-quality information. Moreover, there are limited published data relating to the quality of information content on orthodontic social media sites and networks. YouTube has been studied extensively and the majority of the literature on the subject indicates that the quality of YouTube videos as a method of information provision in orthodontics is of a low standard. One of the reasons attributed for this was that the videos assessed were largely created by patients rather than professionals. As much alluring the world of social media is, it is important to exercise caution while implementing it for interacting with patients and impairing knowledge. At times, if the information meted out is substandard, or if patients are dissatisfied with any advice received, it could allow a patient to pursue a clinical negligence claim. In its guidance on social media use,^[14] the General Dental Council (GDC) states that when using social media, dental professionals must: 'Maintain and protect patients' information by not publishing any information which could identify them on social media without their explicit consent.

Maintain appropriate boundaries in the relationships you have with patients and other members of the dental team.

Comply with any internet and social media policy set out by your employer.

The GDC also states that the responsibilities of dental professionals do not change because they are communicating via social media.

Thus, social media is a double edged sword, the use of which should be done meticulously and strategically.

Blogs: "Weblogs", or "blogs," are frequently updated websites where content [text, pictures, sound files, etc.] is posted on a frequent basis and displayed in reverse chronological order. Readers often have the option to comment on any individual posting, which is identified by a unique uniform resource locator. Thorough comments and references to other online sources in the postings and links to favourite blogs in the sidebar [the "blogroll"], blogs form a clustered network of interconnected texts: the "blogosphere".^[15] The platforms also generate relevant content for a website and can provide a foundation for product marketing and social media promotion to drive search engine traffic to a website.^[16] It acts as an adjunct to increase the effectiveness of the practice's website via search engine



optimization. Also, following the format of leading generations, nurturing and conversions, once the traffic is led to the practice's site, a good blog will keep clients interested in interacting with the team. By providing content through the blog that answers client questions, addresses their issues, and offers real solutions, the traffic will be transformed into qualified leads. As leads are directed time and again to read the latest blog post, a relationship is being built with those leads, nurturing them through the patient journey. A trust starts to build up and a brand is established. The outcome of this reflects in the juncture when the potential patients are called upon to make a decision on opting for the practice, wherein the practice's name shall remain in their mind, leading to occurrence of conversions. It provides an insight into the audience, i.e., patients and potential patients and helps develop observational skills in two essential ways. First coming up with topics for a regular blog induces on one to consider the thought process of the target audience. i.e patients and potential patients here. When writing a good blog, the writer is constantly contemplating what the reader wants to know, and the best strategies to impart that knowledge, and how to compel the reader to take action. The blog content can also be repurposed for social media. Social reach is strengthened with blog content and driving new website visitors to the blog via social channels. Lastly, it helps in building links. Links for authoritative websites act as a vote of confidence or recommendation from other websites. This signals to Google that the practice is trustworthy and an expert in the field. *Advertising*: It denotes a range of strategic marketing efforts to promote orthodontic services, enhance practice visibility, and attract new patients (Table 1). The key strategies include both online and offline methods.^[17]

Table 1: Advertising strategies for marketing.

Sl no.	Online advertising strategy	Offline advertising strategy
1.	Website optimization Ensures a practice's website ranks highly on search engines.	Print media Includes flyers, postcards, and local newspaper ads.

2.	Social media engagement Leverages platforms like Facebook and Instagram to create a community and interact with patients.	Community involvement Sponsoring local events or participating in health fairs.
3.	Email campaigns Keeps in touch with patients and informs them of new services or promotions.	Referral program Encourages existing patients to refer friends and family.

Online advertising enables orthodontists target specific audiences with precision. It helps focus on clients looking for orthodontic care in an area through a Google campaign to book an appointment. Social media platforms like Facebook and Google offer clients tools and services for this campaign. Websites help by providing information about the clinics services. Offline dental ads may reach a broader audience but are less targeted. Flyers featuring dental ads with images, claims and prices can be handed out in local communities. Billboards appeal to the eyes of passerby driving through the city. The benefits include increased visibility as in more people learn about the clinic. It renders a targeted outreach. Quality ads with credible claims from reliable sources improve how people perceive a clinic and its price value. On the flipside, some forms of advertisement can be expensive and time consuming.

5. Search engine optimization

SEO, or Search Engine Optimization, involves optimizing a practice's website to enhance it's visibility in search engine results. By utilizing targeted keywords, optimizing onpage elements and focusing on local SEO tactics, orthodontic practices can attract more organic traffic and patients. It also encompasses strategies such as: content creation, link building, social media integration, to establish the practice's authority and credibility online. [Fig 1]. It helps improve the practice's online presence increase patient interaction and thus, drive growth by ensuring that the website ranks well for relevant search queries related to dental services.



Fig- 1 Building blocks to search engine optimization success for an orthodontist. Taken from Gupta G, Miller MK, Darda M. The key to successful online marketing for an orthodontic practice: Mastering the plan. In Seminars in Orthodontics 2016 Dec 1 [Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 313-321].

6. Reviews and testimonials

Patient reviews and testimonials are crucial parts of digital marketing because they are multi-purpose content machines by which one can build social proof, boost SEO, and update website with new content. Using reviews in marketing also serves as feedback mechanisms that can act as powerful endorsements that can significantly impact a brand's credibility and popularity. Ways to strategize these include highlighting reviews on key conversion pages^[18] such as placing testimonials prominently on homepage, product pages, and checkout pages serve as powerful trust signals. Including a few high-impact testimonials can reassure visitors of the value and reliability of the product or service offered. Incorporation of a variety of formats, such as text, video, and audio reviews, to cater to the different preferences of audience. Videos can be particularly persuasive because they show real people advocating for the services offered, making the testimonials feel more authentic and relatable. Reviews and testimonials can be treated as gateways to feature relevant keywords, high-quality links, good resolution or original images, provide keyword-rich content, increase retention of users on the website, and perform similar activities that boost search engine rankings. For example, positive testimonials, patient success stories in the form of blogs or articles, and detailed

reviews can engage visitors, making them spend more time on site. Search engines interpret longer dwell times as a sign that site is providing valuable content, which can improve SEO rankings.

7. Key features of digital marketing strategy

The amalgamation and interaction between internet channels and traditional channels is a prime component of digital marketing strategy development. It is a channel marketing strategy and it requires to be integrated with other channels as part of multi-channel marketing. The key features include certain points which the strategy should accomplish, such as:

1. alignment with business and marketing strategy with more specific annual business priorities and initiatives.
2. Implementation of clear objectives for business and brand development and the online contribution of leads and sales for the Internet or other digital channels.
3. Consistency with the types of customers [in this case, patients] who use and can be effectively reached through the channel.
4. Defining a compelling, differential value proposition for the channel which must be effectively communicated to patients.
5. Specifying the combination of online and offline communication tools used to attract visitors to the company website or interact with the brand through other digital media such as email or mobile.
6. Manage the online customer lifecycle through the stages of attracting visitors to the website, converting them into customers and retention and growth.

8. Benefits of digital marketing

The benefits of digital marketing in supporting marketing includes identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer responses profitably. The web-based platforms can be used for marketing research to find out customers' needs and wants, justifying the term "identifying". Highlighting on "anticipating", the Internet provides an additional channel which enables customers to access information and make purchases. Scrutinizing and evaluating this demand is key to governing resource allocation to e-marketing Satisfying forms a key success factor in e-marketing and refers to achieving customer



satisfaction through the electronic channel. It pinpoints importance of the site's user friendliness, performance, the standard of associated customer service to mention a few. In the sphere of orthodontics and even general dentistry, it is advantageous in: obtaining enhanced online visibility, which is essential in the current scenario. Digital marketing techniques such as SEO [Search Engine Optimization], PPC [Pay-Per-Click] advertising, and social media marketing help dental practices increase their visibility online. An optimized online presence ensures that the practice appears at the top of search results, when potential patients look for it. This increased visibility heralds in more website traffic and, ultimately, more patients. Another significant advantage of digital marketing is the ability to create targeted marketing campaigns. Data can be used to target specific demographics, locations, and even behaviours. It is often more cost-effective than traditional marketing methods. Precise budgets can be set and payment can be done for actual results, such as clicks or conversions. This means that every amount spent on marketing is used efficiently, providing a higher return on investment [ROI]. Tools like Google Ads allow for budget control and targeting, ensuring that marketing efforts are both effective and affordable. Another crucial arena is regarding engaging with patients, that paves path for building long-term relationships and fostering loyalty. Digital marketing provides various channels for patient engagement, such as social media, email newsletters, and blog posts. These platforms permit practices to interact with their patients, answer questions, and provide valuable information which leads to higher patient satisfaction and retention.

Considering positive reviews and testimonials can significantly influence potential patients' decisions. Digital marketing strategies, including reputation management, allow orthodontists to maintain a positive online presence. By encouraging satisfied patients to leave reviews and promptly addressing any negative feedback, practices can build and balance a strong reputation. Search Engine Optimization [SEO] is the spine of effective digital marketing. Orthodontists can improve their search engine rankings by utilizing this to the core. Higher rankings connote that the practice will appear at the top of search results, increasing the probability that potential patients will find and choose their services. Increased website traffic is a key indicator

of a successful digital marketing campaign. Measurable results form one of the most powerful aspects of digital marketing. Insights on performance via analytics tools, are effective in improvising strategies quickly for better outcomes. This immediate feedback loop ensures that marketing efforts are always optimized for maximum effectiveness.

Digital marketing allows dental practices to market their services twenty four seven. This ensures that potential patients can find information about the practice at any time, increasing the chances of attracting new patients.

In a competitive industry, having a strong digital marketing strategy provides a cutting edge. Embracing digital marketing, makes the orthodontist stand out in the competition and contributes to growth of practice when implemented effectively.

Framework for developing a digital marketing strategy: This involves the following approaches namely,[Fig2]

A: Defining the online opportunity

Setting objectives to define the potential is the core of this phase of strategy development. Key activities include:

1. Setting digital marketing objectives
2. Practice can set specific numerical for its online channels and then resource to deliver these objectives. These objectives should be informed by and influence the business objectives and also the following two activities.

1a. Evaluation of digital marketing performance via web analytics tools to measure the contribution of leads, sales and brand involvement currently delivered by online communications.

1b. Assessment of online marketplace: Situation analysis review of the micro-environment [customers, competitors, intermediaries, suppliers and internal capabilities and resources] and the broader macro-environment which influences strategy, such as legal requirements and technology innovation.

B: Selecting the strategic approach:

Assessing and defining the customer value proposition. Doing so with the through the online channel and the manner it relates to the core proposition delivered by the company, in this case the practice. This is followed by reviewing the segmentation and targeting options and improvisations can be made.



Defining digital communications mix: Selection of the offline and online communications tools to encourage usage of an organisation's online services and to generate leads and sales. New outbound communications and event-triggered touch strategies are developed to support patients through their relationship with the company.

C: Delivering results online:

This involves implementing digital marketing plan & details the implementation of the strategy.

1. Implement customer experience [here, considering patients']:

the website and the email marketing communications form the online interactions, patients will make with a practice. Online customer relationship management capabilities are created to understand customer's characteristics, needs and behaviours and to deliver targeted personalised value.

2. Execute digital communications:

Management of the continuous online marketing communications such as search engine marketing, partnership social media marketing, sponsorships and affiliate arrangements, and campaign-based e-marketing communications such as online advertising, email marketing a to encourage usage of the online service and to support patient/client acquisition and retention campaigns. Integration of the digital media channels with traditional marketing has proved to be very impactful.

3. Another aspect is customer profiling, monitoring and improving & maintaining online activities. Capturing profile and behavioural data on customer interactions with the practice and summarising and disseminating reports and alerts about performance compared with objectives in order to drive performance improvement is a must.

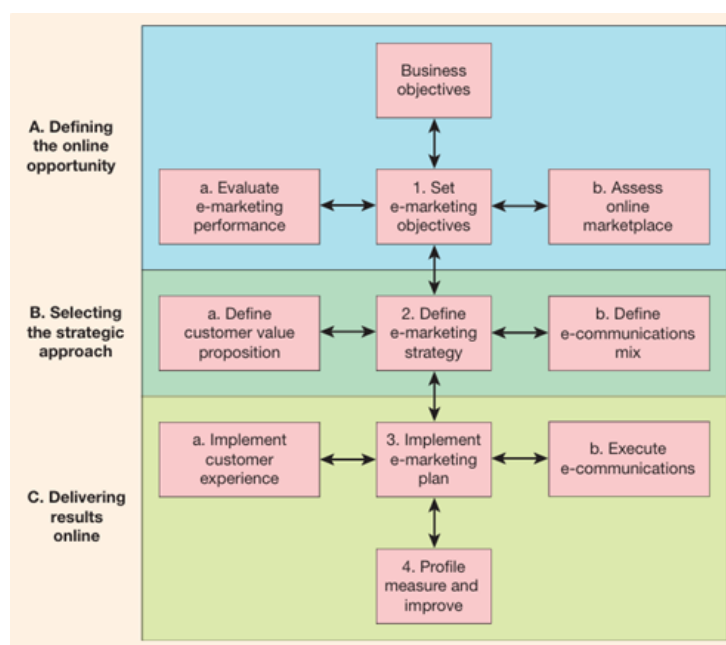


Fig-2 A generic digital marketing strategy development process. Taken from Chaffey, D., Ellis Chadwick, F. [2019]. Digital Marketing: Strategy, Implementation & Practice. United Kingdom: Pearson.

9. Marketing tips for orthodontic offices

Certain useful pearls to consider for marketing practice are as follows:

1. Identifying target: this includes identifying competitors, the reviewers, analysing these and making a checklist of the strategies that are being implemented in the growing practice.



2. Optimizing website via using targeted keywords with headlines, relevant, informative and appealing content which stands out.

3. Off page optimization by increasing backlinks, creating downloadable content.

4. Leveraging social media platforms to connect, grow and establish the practice.

Conclusion

Digital marketing is a game changer, when put along with the old time's approach and the primary shift in orthodontic culture is from a doctor-centric practice to a patient centered one.^[19] Thus, it is of prime significance to stay updated with the changing trends and adapt to the technologies that are shaping the face of marketing. There are a lot of intricacies to the modes of digital marketing in orthodontics, but it has been a promising impact with the ongoing changes and advances in all spheres. Utilizing the boon well ensures success. Should there be challenges, there are strategies to improvise and make things better. Given that attention span are short these days, where everyone wants everything instantly, it is equally demanding to leverage the tools that online marketing has to offer. The good part is that, it happens all with a single click. The prospects are very much interesting and with artificial intelligence taking over, practitioners and academicians believe that is the future of our society.^[20]

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