



How the pandemic changed the use of social media within dentistry

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Evidence-based practice is the bedrock of excellence in dentistry. It ensures dentists and their teams make the best clinical decisions that are safely delivered, appropriate to each patient and with predictable results.

Dentistry continues to undergo rapid change with both expectations and digital technology driving the demand for faster and more effective treatments, new materials and innovative techniques as well as creating exciting opportunities in communication.

Digitalisation has forever changed the way in which dentists and their teams interact with patients – from appointment booking systems to scanning and impression taking,

from results simulation and treatment planning to patient education and marketing. With the emergence of social media came fresh opportunities to communicate and, for dental marketing purposes, it provided a virtual reality version of the much-established word-of-mouth, but with the potential to reach a far larger number of people.

When dental practices and dentists began launching their own Instagram and Facebook accounts, concerns grew within the profession that what was being shared online might not always fit with the ideals of evidence-based dentistry. Some naysayers, vocal in their criticism, suggested Instagram in particular undermined the key principles of good clinical care and was simply an outlet for those who they considered ‘show ponies’ within the profession.

Other arguments maintained that posts might create ethical challenges for the profession as well as fuel mental health issues

for those lured by the promise of ‘smile perfection’.

But, throughout the pandemic, even the most cynical among us must surely have seen the benefits of strong and consistent messaging across social media platforms in light of the fact that people had nowhere else to turn for their oral health information.

With people bereft of access to their dental practices for almost three months, those teams with Instagram and Facebook accounts were able to share dental tips, advice, keep followers updated on relevant public health safety measures and signpost those who needed it to emergency care.

In the first lockdown, Digimax created 10 downloadable social media posts on how to manage toothache at home for dentists to share with their patients. The link went viral and attracted more than 18,000 downloads from teams across the UK (thanks to dentists Dr Becky Davies for the source guidance

and Dr Nilesh Parmar for fact-checking). We also designed PDF versions that practices could send out to patients thereby ensuring a continuation of that all-important connection. The popularity certainly suggests that social media can make a tangible difference to patient education and on a wider level.

Listing treatment offers and showcasing smile makeovers became irrelevant during this period, which also meant many dental *Instagram* users had to become more inventive, with some diversifying by sharing more personal posts. Now, 18 months or so down the line and many dentists have discovered a new way to attract patients. By creating a dual personal/business account, they are capturing the imagination of followers with relatable story-telling and offering a more human side to their clinical role.

Whatever content they enjoyed sharing during lockdown, people were buying into their brand. Rather than using an account to 'sell' dentistry, there was seemingly much more potential to connect with people by varying their content. With more time for people to scroll through their phones during lockdown, it was the dental accounts that connected that saw the benefits.

What the pandemic proves is that healthcare is now shaped and driven by digital technology and a large number of patients are not averse to this revolution. There is, of course, a huge difference between aspiration and reality, which means there is an expectation upon everybody in the profession to help patients distinguish between the two in their digital marketing.

Of course it is impossible to generically solve the dental problems or concerns of followers in a single social media post. Without details of the risks and challenges or alternative solutions that are a part of any treatment journey, posts such as these are giving potential patients only half a story. What *Instagram* posts do is offer insight into what *may* be achieved; a taster if you will of your clinical excellence.

Whilst nobody wishes to highlight negative aspects of various procedure in a 60-second *Instagram* reel, it might be prudent to temper any aspirational posts with those that discuss important oral health messages, focus on practice ethos or open up a discussion in an interactive way with treatment-curious followers.

There remains a huge responsibility upon the profession to offer evidence-based care.

And this is important in the virtual world as well as the surgery chair. The onus is upon the profession to bust myths and shut down incorrect and bad dental advice – something that was particularly prevalent throughout the pandemic on all social media platforms.

Posts by influencers and other popular accounts that have the potential to go viral are a very real danger to patients' health. Quick and cheap so-called smile solutions, such as DIY teeth straightening tips, harmful home whitening advice, the promotion of clip-on veneers and direct-to-patient braces, for example, need to be addressed on the same platform on which they are shared. There is a duty of care to protect patients and make a case for safe dental care.

The recently launched *Facebook* group, '*Instagram for Dentists*', saw more than 3,000 dental professionals join within five days – a remarkable head count given that the profession is hugely busy on the frontline. What this therefore suggests is that social media has a key role to play and a relevant topic for ideas sharing and discussion.

With posts covering important areas, such as relationship building and engagement, how to mix the 'professional' and the 'personal' brand as well as less obvious topics, such as what happens to your social media accounts when you leave a practice and join another, the group continues to reflect the burgeoning power of social media to promote excellence in dentistry.

COVID-19's multi-media marketing demands required far more complex creative strategies. When practices closed and complex treatments were put on hold, *Instagram* and *Facebook* proved to be more of an additional communication tool than platforms to showcase treatment results.

Dentists are on the frontline of this rapidly changing environment and would be wise to be their own storytellers in an arena of superfast information-sharing that is often muddled by incorrect data from unreliable sources.

Dentists and their teams must engage positively with potential patients and arm them with evidence-based knowledge to help them make informed decisions about their dental health.

Social media is a key part of this endeavour. This is perhaps borne out by the fact that there is even an emergence of content creator and digital marketing roles within dental practices specifically aimed at creating strategic marketing and engaging posts to boost business.

The primary aim of dentists is to deliver evidence-based care. In a world where the concept of 'influence' is part of our culture, it was the more dynamic dental professionals who used COVID-19 to explore the possibilities of innovative ways to connect. Savvy dental account-holders now act as evidence-based influencers, helping to ensure more informed patients whilst creating a more sustainable business. This pandemic therefore may just have nudged the profession's most recent revolution on a little.

You can find the *Facebook* group '*Instagram for Dentists*' at www.facebook.com/groups/530556247751192 ♦



Bio

Shaz Memon is an award-winning dental marketing expert. Founder of Digimax Dental, the world's highest rated dental marketing agency, Shaz has worked in the industry for more than two decades. Designer, marketer and business leader, he worked across a wide variety of sectors, gaining experience with leading names, including the BBC, before finding his preferred niche in dentistry marketing. Voted as Top 14th Most Influential in UK Dentistry Top 50 2020 and 2021. He has published two business volumes – *Instagram for Dentists* and *Instagram for Business*. Shaz is also founder of the charity Wells on Wheels and training company Clinics.

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