

SEO and Social Media—Together at Last

by David Evans, PhD, MBA

Participation in online social networking has skyrocketed. Facebook has actually surpassed Google as the most heavily trafficked Web site. Facebook has more than 700 million registered accounts, and 500 million of these users are active on the site for 55 minutes per day. It isn't a tween or teen thing, either; the fastest-growing Facebook demographic is people aged 35 to 64—also the prime age category for cosmetic surgery seekers.

Facebook and other social media outlets often provide a much-needed intimate touch, a virtual word-of-mouth that has your neighbor referring you to a surgeon or telling you about a hot new, must-try antiaging procedure. This phenomenon is unlike the impersonal feel of search page results.

The question becomes just how much time and energy should you invest in social media compared to other Internet marketing strategies, such as search engine optimization (SEO)? Social media is time-consuming if you do it right, and as a result many are tempted to put all their online marketing eggs in this one basket.

Not so fast. Social media doesn't work as effectively without SEO, and SEO won't be quite as powerful without social networking. The two work synergistically and must both be part of any viable Internet marketing strategy.

A mere 11% of people who surf the 'Net for health care information use Facebook and/or other social

networking sites to gather information on conditions and treatments for themselves and others. By contrast, 80% of Internet users seek health information through search or destination sites including Google, Yahoo!, and Bing.



SEO gives you a bigger bang for your buck when it comes to attracting potential patients or garnering media coverage.

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF GOOGLE

SEO is a moving target. Google and other search engines keep shaking things up. On a cool, clear fall morning last October, Internet users from the United States and Canada woke up to the largest change in search rankings in the history of the Internet.

Google had completely revamped its search algorithm, which means your Web site SEO strategy needs to be looked at and upgraded.

Prior to these Google changes, only large educational/consumer portals could rank for such highly competitive searches as "breast implants," "tummy tuck," or "butt implants."

Not anymore. Google now lists a handful of local surgeons on the

first page of the search results for these core terms. Local plastic surgeons can now drive traffic to their Web site through "organic" searching for local search terms, such as "San Diego breast augmentation" and core terms such as "breast augmentation."

Why does this matter? Core search terms drive five times as much traffic as local search terms.

SEO AND SOCIAL MEDIA: HAPPY TOGETHER

Maintaining an active social media program for your practice also helps boost your SEO efforts. Your number of fans and reviews can influence your rankings and search engine visibility. Bing has been the most aggressive at incorporating fans and reviews into its search results, and experts predict Google will follow suit and also move to incorporate these elements into its search algorithm. YouTube is owned by Google and already has an effect on search engine results.

The challenge becomes how to effectively and efficiently divide your resources.

While there is no precise formula or secret to success, a simple evaluation of your marketing assets, accomplishments, and goals can help you decide where you need to step up or pull back.

If you already rank well for key search terms, your Google Places profile is tip-top, and you have good visibility in several of the top directories, then focus more on social media.



If you are not ranking well for core terms and have limited visibility elsewhere, focus on SEO and consider listing in top directories. Do not completely disregard social media when beefing up your SEO efforts. Set up a blog and a Facebook page, and post to each at least once or twice per month to keep them alive until you can devote more time to their maintenance.

Get your SEO rankings up to speed, and then kick up your social media presence. You will then fully reap the benefits of your efforts.

Hiring a marketing professional to regularly maintain all of your practice's social media interactions can get costly, but at least you know you are covered in all relevant media. In this way, your time spent on social media is at the "executive producer" level—meaning you write and/or approve all content and OK the graphical and photographic content on your Web site.

You may not necessarily handle technical or daily posting chores. Instead, your marketing/PR person is working on it or you have found a staff person who's interested in

helping with the online maintenance. This covers Facebook, Twitter, Web news feeds, e-mail newsletters and "news blasts," and other broadcast methods.

David Evans, PhD, MBA, is the CEO of Ceatus Media Group, based in San Diego. A recognized authority on Internet medical marketing strategies, Evans has spoken at meetings of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, European Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery, and the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, among others. He can be reached at devans@ceatus.com or (858) 454-5505.