



High-touch social media: success in a new era

By Rita Zamora

Reception rooms have always been the gateway to high-touch patient experiences. For years, practices have proudly displayed photos and video tours of their beautiful reception rooms on social media.

Picture inviting, comfortable upholstered seating for parents or patients to relax before their appointments. In some cases, practices have interesting art for patients to enjoy.

Other practices set up beverage stations for visitors to sip their favorite coffee, tea or other beverages. One surgical practice offered hairspray, scented hand creams and fragrances for patients to spritz before they left their appointments.

Today, in COVID-19 times, many of these options are gone – no more beverage stations, no more amenities that might invite lingering – and anything that cannot be wiped down or sterilized has likely been removed.

Imagine new patients no longer greeted with friendly smiles at the reception desk – hopefully, the masked greeter will be smiling with their eyes! And how about meeting a surgeon or team member for the first time, at least for now, covered in layers of PPE and ready to expedite the patient's treatment. Upon checkout, there will be no chit-chat at the front desk. There will be no time to waste waiting for the correct payment due or perusing calendars for the next appointment.

Creating memorable patient experiences

It is time to adopt a new mindset. Consider social media your new reception room.

Practices are moving from high-touch, in-person to high-touch, online experiences. Many practices are already taking advantage of telehealth to get to know or connect with patients in advance of their appointments. Now is the time to embrace technology and social media as the most powerful tools to establish and grow patient relationships.

The pandemic has forced much of the population to embrace technology – even those who refused to be on Facebook or Instagram are finally opening up to the idea.

A doctor who never wanted to be on social media finally asked for help opening a personal account a few weeks ago. More doctors and office managers are interested in expanding their social media efforts.

In fact, Facebook usage was up almost 30 percent this spring. Much of the population has grown familiar with the opportunities to connect digitally. (Some have no choice if they are physically distancing from others.) Now it's up to OMS practices to take advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead.

'Meaningful connections' possible?

Perhaps you are struggling with what to say in your patient communication or wondering what the best method is to connect with patients or parents. If so, you are not alone. With everything going on in the world, not to mention the new day-to-day protocols you and your team are getting used to, it is not surprising patient updates may have taken a back seat.

You may already know how vital patient relationships are. Excellent communication is the No. 1 way to:

- Reduce patient anxiety.
- Establish and grow trust.
- Increase patient satisfaction.
- Grow strong relationships.

Trust and strong relationships allow patients or parents to feel comfortable:

- Accepting treatment plans.
- Pre-paying for treatment.
- Sharing positive reviews.
- Referring friends and family.
- Remaining loyal to a practice.

The good news is you have unprecedented opportunities to communicate with patients through tools such as social media. You can call, email or text, but social media is where patients and parents are spending their time – now more than ever.

Fear stops about 20 percent of patients from visiting the dentist. This statistic is pre-COVID-19, according to

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Mark S. Wolff, DDS, PhD, Dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine. In a recent webinar, Dr. Wolff shared, “Whether real or perceived, fear of the unknown, not knowing what to expect – not to mention fear of needles, pain or uncomfortable procedures – have kept patients from dental care. COVID-19 is expected to bring a higher level of fear and requires us to be more communicative than ever.”

It is essential to keep patients informed about the state of your practice. Many patients may be in a heightened state of stress – scrutinizing cleanliness, order, sanitization, etc. While OMS teams know their practice is one of the most hygienic places to visit, patients and parents will need that reassurance. They want to know what you are doing about this. How will you keep them safe? Things have to be seen through the lens of patients’ heightened awareness.

Today, patients are looking to social media for updates from family, friends, neighbors, local officials and government. As Pew Research Center recently noted: “Social media is now a part of the news diet of an increasingly large share of the population.”

Being real and sharing the human side

In a low-touch world where human interaction is reduced, authenticity brings comfort. It builds trusts and makes strong connections.

When patients cannot see the smile behind your mask, they will remember the smiling photos you shared on Instagram. When patients cannot sit in your operatory and chit-chat with you before and after treatment, they can remember what they have in common with you and your team through your posts on Facebook.

You can establish and grow relationships with patients. Take the time to communicate consistently and update patients with everything they need to know to feel safe through your social media content.

Growing relationships through social media

First of all, get intentional. Start thinking about how you want to be perceived – among patients and referral sources. Do you want to be known as the high-tech OMS? The OMS who is obsessed with personal and professional growth? Or maybe the friendly, community-focused OMS?

There is no right or wrong – you just have to feel good about it in your gut. Once you know how you want to be perceived, be sure you are personalizing your content. If you have not already, ditch the stock photos. Make sure you and your team are sharing who you are inside and outside the office. Post photos and video of you living life, enjoying hobbies and smiling with the people and pets who bring you joy.

Be thoughtful and intentional about what you post. Remember social media is your new reception area – patients can linger, get to know you and your team and ask questions through Facebook Messenger or Instagram if they prefer. Instead of offering beverages for patients to enjoy in your physical reception room, post occasional patient appreciation giveaways for a local coffee or ice cream shop gift card.

Instead of chatting with patients after their appointment, post brief videos with answers to frequently asked questions. Post Instagram stories with behind-the-scenes photos, video snippets or lighthearted updates.

Instead of sharing practice information with patients on a reception room flatscreen, post that information in social media content. For example, share you offer online scheduling, telehealth and/or the ability to pre-pay or pay online or via text. All these conveniences save patients time and make things easier for them. Digital convenience shows you care and, for patients wanting to experience a touchless appointment, virtual consults and options to pre-pay are greatly appreciated.

Remember to say thank you to patients and referring doctors for their referrals. Tell them how much you appreciate the opportunity to care for them – not just once.

Achieving above-average, meaningful and memorable interaction in a low-touch world is possible. Make social media your new reception room. Share your human side and be real – authenticity grows trust and valuable patient relationships. Most importantly, embrace a high-touch social media mentality.

Now is the time to act

If you find yourself lacking in the social media department, here are a few challenges and how to overcome them:

- **Identify hurdles** – Do you and your team struggle to find the time to manage social media? If so, you may want to consider outsourcing. There are programs to fully outsource or partially outsource (hybrid programs).



Perhaps you just need a one-time consultation to help give you a jumpstart. All of these are viable options.

- **Implement protocols** – Just as you have systems and protocols for your practice operations, you should have protocols for your social media management. This means you have specific, repeatable tasks every month. These tasks also can be used to delegate and hold your team accountable.
- **Take action** – New patients in particular are going to conduct rigorous research before they schedule an appointment. They have always judged practices based on online reviews, and this will be heightened. They will scrutinize the cleanliness of your practice and be more in tune with the energy of you and your team because they

cannot see your facial expressions behind masks. Now is the time to take action. Put a plan in place to nurture, restore or reinvigorate patient and referral relationships.

With social media, you can easily share effective, reassuring and valuable updates with patients and referring providers. Effective, consistent communication will help protect valuable patient relationships in the new, low-touch OMS world. ■

Rita Zamora is author of the book, Get Found, Get Liked, Get Patients – Making the Most of Social Media. She and her team have offered social media programs for dental professionals since 2008. She has more than 20 years' experience in the business of dentistry. Additional information is available at RitaZamora.com.



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