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Go Online! Marketing in the Hearing Industry

In the first part of this article (Audiology Practices Vol. 2, Nr. 4, December 2010), we addressed what clinics can do to market their professional differentiation effectively by matching their internal and external realities and creating relevant marketing messages based on this. This is best accomplished using the web. Here we have our target actually seeking information about us, wanting to begin their journey on hearing remediation without being dragged in. This voluntary self-exposure to the information you have to share without you going to great efforts and expenses to get your message out there is the way the new hearing aid patient will want to access information. They are generally inundated with information and are unlikely to want more marketing messages and hence may not even be paying attention to them even if it would be in their best interest to do so. Furthermore, your blanket marketing also reaches people who are not your target and are blocking you out anyway. So the return on your traditional marketing is generally very low.

Marketing Online

The best way to market audiology services online, is to appear in search results when customers research hearing and hearing aids. Online marketing can be passive or active. Passive online marketing would include placing an ad, putting up a website, and engaging SEO (search engine optimization). Active online marketing is where you take action by writing a blog, joining forums and groups, engaging in social networking.

In terms of passive online marketing, the best way is to use a website that is search engine optimized. It should also appear on local searches in Google. By simply registering with

this service, your new prospective patients can find you faster.

But that's not enough. Let's review the benefits of online marketing relative to traditional marketing and then look at the tools at your disposal in more detail that can open your marketing potential.

The first benefit of online marketing is, as mentioned earlier, its on-demand nature. Traditional marketing such as TV or print ads is interruptive, neither solicited nor interesting to many of those who see it. Internet marketing is on-demand, when people search, they find it when they need it. Even online ads when properly targeted can be a lot less disruptive and better received than traditional media advertisement.

Another benefit of online advertising is its low cost and high return compared to traditional advertising. TV, radio and newspaper ads cost between \$10,000 to \$50,000 for a nominal campaign and will result in an average of about 400 leads. A large-scale online campaign that costs \$10,000 will result in an average of 800 leads. That's twice the return for the same or lower cost. In fact, yellow pages advertising is still quite expensive as is SEO. For a small business online marketing can still be expensive. This is where active online marketing comes in. It is best when done in conjunction with passive online marketing and it is free. You simply join a community, follow groups, share ideas, and start discussions. The more quality contributions you generate, the more you get found in searches that your prospective patients will find when they search.

Let's jump forward for a minute and imagine this: if you could participate in a "mesh ecosystem" as described later, potentially for a fraction of the cost, consider the exponential value of the marketing dollar spent - lower passive marketing costs with a lot of integrated free active marketing opportunities, right where your prospective patients are searching already. There are always new opportunities coming up

for online marketing, just keep your eyes open. The best are the ones with targeted content that allow you to market your clinic as well as yourself as a clinician with both active and passive marketing tools.

A third benefit of online marketing is its stickiness. This means that unlike traditional ads that lose relevancy quickly, online ads have further reach, longer relevancy and better lead retention. Online promotions can be used to get lead information of who is interested in your offer, whereas you cannot get the contact information of those who see a print ad or watch your TV ad. Your website is easily updatable whereas an ad is more cost-intensive to update, rework and reprint. Your website is always fresh, always on.

Distribution of information is another key benefit of online promotions and marketing. Once your information is online, it can be linked from anywhere, it can be shared on social media sites, and it can be mailed to subscribers of email newsletters. The same information goes further. More and more users are going online and you will find a wider reach for your target audience simply by there being more of them online.

Reach is another advantage of online marketing. You can reach a global audience without a global company and you can focus on local searches at the same time and allow the community you serve to find you faster and easier. When you reach someone online, you have a one-on-one audience. They are engaged in your offer and therefore a somewhat personal relationship to you, your brand and your offer is forged, which translates to faster decision making if there is resonance with your target. This is much harder to do with a generic ad that is blasted out to the masses.

Finally, measurable results are key to good management. In the first part of this article, the issue of consistently reassessing your marketing plan was explored. It is important to keep track of what you do and what's working,

and what's not. Online marketing allows for analytics. You can see who clicks where, how often, and track your prospects' activity relative to your online presence. If your site is easy to navigate, clear, and concise, you can expect faster results than traditional advertising both in providing instant feedback and eliciting responses. Ideally all of your information is easy to digest and right there to take action on. Your site is an interactive ad that keeps evolving and providing more value to the prospective patient

Using your website to generate office traffic and positive word of mouth referrals to your practice is essential to the success of any business today. If you haven't updated your website within the last two years, it's a good idea to consider revising it with video content and the latest search engine optimization techniques. Here are some options to consider:

1. Use a local webmaster. When selecting a web designer it's a good idea to find someone who specializes in medical businesses and have a proven record of success. Checking references is a must.
2. Audiology Online offers website development services and has a proven record of success developing websites for a variety of hearing aid dispensing practices.
3. EducatedPatients.com is another company specializing in website development for audiology practices
4. Contact Markus Hilbert at Ear Works, Inc for more information about website development for your practice.
5. hearingpages is an upcoming ecosystem where all players create value through contribution, social media elements, and integrated interactive communication tools. hearingpages.com is launching Spring 2011 and is open to the pre-registration.

you're looking for. If something changes in your organization, your offer or your brand, its fast and easy to update everything in one place.

Going to the next level

Now that we see the value in online marketing, let's consider how to go about it. We assume the basics - a modern website messaging a clear differentiator as to who you are, why prospective patients should see you and not your competitor, and a single marketing message. If this is not clear, you are simply another vanilla solution that doesn't get anyone excited. We need to make our clinic a rewarding destination and this needs to be communicated consistently in all of your branding and promotional messaging. Next, we assume that you have optimized the site for search engines with a SEO (search engine optimization) service. And you have registered with a local search service like Google. You are now ready to go to the next level.

Interactivity = Integration + Meshing

The next level is interactivity. Your site should not just be information. It should engage the visitor so that they stay at your site. You want to give them something to come back for. Some of these tools include blogs, forums, contact forms, widgets and tools that engage the visitor. The longer they stay at your site, the more likely they are to stick around, and actually decide to call you, come in and buy something.

The highest level is integration. This is the social networking component, and above that, the so-called "mesh". In terms of integration, we know social networking from Facebook and other such sites. There's more to it than just sharing your status. There are groups you can create and events you can invite your contacts and their contacts to. The great thing is that you can generate buzz and drive traffic to yourself using all kinds of people to pass on the bug to help your message to go viral. In Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point" we learn that there are key

types of people who are the best at creating this buzz. First, there are Connecters. These are individuals who have ties in many different realms and act as conduits between them, helping to engender connections, relationships, and cross-fertilization that might not have otherwise occurred. These are really important people who influence others to come to you. Next are Mavens. Mavens are people who have a strong compulsion to help other consumers by assisting them in the decision-making process. Lastly are Salesmen. These are people whose unusual charisma allows them to be extremely persuasive in steering others' buying decisions and behaviors. All these influencers, these "tipping point clients", are going to grow your practice. However, more recent research shows that this may not be the case at all. The role of these types of people are not questioned, it is their exclusive ability to create buzz towards the tipping point that is under scrutiny. In fact, new research suggests more powerful influences among the masses. Duncan Watts' research shows that when ignoring these influencers, marketing models that rely on the pass-around power of everyday people can double or quadruple the reach of ordinary online campaign. The core idea behind mounds of research is that you don't need to direct your marketing to specific powerful influencers or the "important people" - you just need the common everyday Joe online to like your ad, offer, promo or message, and share it with someone else. This may seem common sense when we think of Facebook and sharing internet content with friends, but you need to be share-worthy too. Bring the masses something they can relate to and will share with their friends, and you have the ultimate word of mouth campaign going for you.

In terms of the "mesh" we now need to take this individual integration to the next level. This level is where resources are shared for a greater value to all who participate. In her book "the mesh", Lisa Gansky states that beyond the basics of web presence, successful businesses will have to participate more and more with customers to design their products and

services, to tailor them to the individual and to deliver them in real time and in real places. Think of a mobile app that allows prospective clients to find you and learn about your services with a built-in feedback system to let you know what they would have wanted or liked better so you can adjust your clinical experience. This kind of relationship builds WOM (word of mouth) in the new internet that you need to survive and to grow beyond mere existence. Above this, the new customer wants transparency. Are you truly an independent or part of a buying group? Do you engage in true cause marketing or is it just a pretense? With a closer customer relationship not only does WOM increase and improve qualitatively by translating into more actual sales, but you also begin to be able to anticipate customers needs - from their questions, thru products and service schedules. You know what they need and can hand-hold them while maintaining and deepening that relationship. Successful companies will engage their customers on multiple points of contact. Not only one clinician, but multiple professionals doing specialized actions in serving the needs of the patient. There may be a tech, an AuD, another specialist in orientation and already they have 3 points of contact. Relationships need to mesh and intertwine, not just be as shallow as one level. Gansky points out that this kind of business thrives best in a mesh ecosystem. In our industry, this is where socially active, cause relevant, forward thinking, web ready hearing clinics are showcased together with a similar format or ecosystem to allow for easy customer review, understanding, interaction and response. As Gansky states, "a core strength of the Mesh is the ability to fully integrate clusters of partners and systems for sharing information". The key is to find an ecosystem that promotes the sharing of space to promote our common interest in hearing care, promote technology that becomes buzzworthy and answer real customer concerns. The way the industry evolves, such an ecosystem is the natural next step.

Conclusion

The key to a successful growth strategy as covered in Part 1 of this article is a solid relationship between your internal reality and what you promote yourself to be in the marketplace. Be clear, concise and highly differentiated. Share that message with anyone - not just influencers - but everyone, as long as they are seeking your message, rather than being one more annoying message they choose to ignore. Move your marketing investment to the internet where your returns are higher. Join an ecosystem, and use many channels including the common ones like Twitter and Facebook. Be active online and you will be seen. Online marketing is much more than a basic website, it needs to be search engine optimized, supported by local search, and interactive and add value to the visitor to avoid losing them. Attention span is short. Make the most of it. Try new things and give them time to grow. As in all things marketing, the long-term perspective wins if it has the ability to adapt quickly to changes in trends.

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