

MANAGEMENT & MARKETING

This column is compiled by JCO Contributing Editor Robert S. Haeger, DDS, MS. Every few months, Dr. Haeger presents a successful approach or strategy for a particular aspect of practice management. Your suggestions for future topics or authors are welcome.

Have you ever wondered how Google determines who ranks at the top of its search results? Do you ever look at page two of a Google search? I know I rarely do. Ranking in the top five in any Google search for orthodontists in your area should be the goal for your practice website.

So now that you know the goal, how do you get there? In this month's column, search engine optimization expert Ali Husayni answers that question by outlining some facts about Google's search methods and by offering his advice on how to place your website in the top five.

Most of us have websites, but we recognize that they are outdated shortly after completion. How often do you revisit your web page to make improvements, and where do you start? As a first step, read Mr. Husayni's article and find out how to fine-tune your website by using some fairly simple steps to move higher on Google searches.

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Mr. Ali Husayni is President, Master Google, 1153 Bergen Parkway, Suite M-128, Evergreen, CO 80439; e-mail: ali.h@mastergoogle.com.

A Guide to Ranking Above Your Competition in Google Search Results

Today, the Yellow Pages is all but dead; prospective patients are turning to the Internet to educate themselves about your services before contacting your office. Your website is the critical tool that will provide the answers they're looking for, establish your credentials, and build trust in your practice.

But how will your patients find your site if it doesn't appear at the top of the search results when they look for an orthodontist on Google? Many practitioners, noticing that their websites are nowhere to be found, don't understand how their competition can be ranked ahead of them.

What Is Google Looking For?

If you are perceived as the best orthodontist in town, your dental colleagues and current patients will refer other patients to you. This results in even more popularity and consequently more patients. I said "perceived" because even if you are the best orthodontist in town, someone else might be perceived as such. How do you change that perception? Of course, if you are truly the best, people will recognize it sooner or later. But how can you fast-forward this recognition? Advertisements? Publications? Taking your colleagues to lunch? Making news?

Google's job is to rank sites based on their relevance to a particular search query. It does so automatically, using an algorithm called a "spider". Google's spider crawls through all the Web pages

on the Internet and gives each one a numerical ranking while extracting all the “keywords” from the visible content. When someone searches for a keyword such as “orthodontist”, Google shows the user the crawled sites ranked from one to a million. But studies show that 90% of the time, Internet surfers click only on sites ranked one through five.

Now, the million-dollar question is: How does Google rank sites? The short answer is that Google must “perceive” your site as the best. The Google spider is a complicated program, and it looks at more than 200 criteria to determine which site is better than a similar site. Through many years of research, as well as trial and error, we have identified the most important factors. In this article, we’ll look at what you and your webmaster can do to show Google that your site is the best and claim a spot at the top of the search results. We’ll also look ahead and consider what could help you in the future.

Content

The *text* on your site is the key to your success. The more informative your site is—in other words, the more information it provides about orthodontics—and the more you keep it up to date, the farther ahead of your competition you will be. Look at your peers’ websites: chances are that they rarely change anything and that most of their information is redundant. Try to be different.

If you’ve copied any of your text from another site, rewrite those pages. If you don’t know whether your site’s copy is duplicated elsewhere, copy and paste a sentence from your home page and search for it on Google by placing the sentence in quotation marks. If Google shows more than one result (your page), your text is the same as that in the other sites that pop up. You can confirm this by clicking on the other results.

Having a *blog* on your site is a must if you want to win this game. Just as important as having one is updating it with fresh information at least twice a month. The more you or your staff write about your practice and post on your blog, the more important you look in Google’s eyes. Moreover, a blog can help you show visitors that you are an

expert in your field. If you provide helpful material on a routine basis, visitors will return to your site routinely to find out the latest information. Do you publish a practice newsletter? If so, any original articles that you include in your newsletter will be ideal for posting to your blog, too.

Site Optimization

Your site needs to be “optimized” for Google. Optimization starts with having keywords in the right places: titles, headings, copy, and so on. It also means removing any unnecessary behind-the-scenes coding, as well as any features that may prevent Google from indexing your entire site. For instance, if a page is built in Flash, then Google is incapable of reading your text. (You’ll need to consult a professional to help you fix this.)

Linking website pages to one another is another aspect of optimization. You can certainly ask your webmaster to optimize your site, but search engine optimization (SEO) services are also offered by many companies (including ours, Master Google*). Many of these companies don’t charge you a dime (we don’t) to professionally optimize your site. To do your own site optimization, you’ll need to be fairly familiar with HTML coding. Since over-optimization can result in your site being banned by Google, you will also want to adhere strictly to Google’s webmaster guidelines** to be on the safe side.

Google Places for Business

Google Places is a service dedicated to local businesses. For example, if a potential patient in Chicago searches for “orthodontist office”, the first thing Google shows is a list of a few practices close to the user’s location. Those “Google Places” listings are included in the “Map” search results as well as in the main (“organic”) results.

If you haven’t registered your business on Google Places, now is the time. It takes 10 minutes and costs you nothing. All you need to do is go to

*Master Google, Evergreen, CO; www.mastergoogle.com.

**www.google.com/support/webmasters.

www.google.com/placesforbusiness and log in to your Google account. Google verifies your location and sends you a numeric code by regular mail. Log in again and finalize your registration using the code. Within a day or so, your listing will appear on Google Places search results.

Being listed in Google Places is an important foundation for your website, but it won't necessarily set you above your competition, because many of your competitors will also have listings. Receiving positive reviews will help your site rank higher. You can e-mail your constituency and ask them to write reviews for you by logging in to their own Google accounts, searching for you in Google, and visiting your Google Places page. You can even send them the link to make it easier for them.

Getting Published

Now that your site is optimized correctly and you have managed your Google Places account, you need to become more popular. The next few steps will help you get "referrals" on the Web so you can be perceived as the best orthodontist in your town.

One method is to write an original article of about 500 words on any orthodontic topic (or hire a writer to do it for you). Then choose any of the Internet publishing sites listed on our website; our current top three sites are:

- www.ezinearticles.com
- www.searchwarp.com
- www.fastpitchnetworking.com

Some of these sites are free; others charge a small fee. You can repeat the process and get published multiple times. But here's the trick: you need to include links back to your site from the published articles. Without links back to your site, your efforts will be in vain.

You can write press releases in the same manner and publish them online. Our blog contains an extensive list of the best press-release distribution sites, including:

- www.marketwire.com
- www.earthtimes.org
- www.prweb.com

Many are free, but others charge from a few

dollars to a few hundred dollars per release. Again, make sure you link back to your site from these publications.

Ask non-competing colleagues or referring dentists who admire your work to mention you on their blogs or websites and include links to your site. This has a huge positive effect on your Google ranking. And of course, the more links to your site, the merrier.

+1 Feature

This is the latest feature of Google search results, working hand-in-hand with the new Google+ social network. When you belong to Google+ and are logged in to your Google account, every time you click on the +1 sign next to a site in your search results, you give that particular site a vote of confidence. The next time you (or your friends who are connected to you through Google+) search for a similar product or service, Google will place the site you voted for higher on the list, thus giving value to your recommendation. According to Google Webmaster Central: "Content recommended by friends and acquaintances is often more relevant than content from strangers. For example, a movie review from an expert is useful, but a movie review from a friend who shares your tastes can be even better."

For now, the +1 feature will change your Google search results only when you are signed in to your Google account and someone in your Google+ circle has +1ed a particular site related to your search query. Google is testing this feature slowly, but the guiding principle is that search results will eventually be affected by the number of +1s. To stay ahead of your competition, make sure your webmaster adds the +1 sign to the banner at the top of your site's pages. Then encourage everyone you know to +1 your website in their search results.

Conclusion

Our team uses these same tried-and-true methods to help our orthodontist clients rank at the top of search results, with 100% success. □