

Three Ways to Be Found on the Internet...

Demystifying How Consumers Find Your Dental Practice Web Site

By **Robert C. Silkey**
CEO, Einstein Industries, Inc.

Introduction & Background

Many practices look to the Internet to build profile and generate additional patient volume. To accomplish this, a practice must have an effective practice Internet strategy, and this begins with a well-designed web site.¹ But simply placing the web site online does not suffice. For the web site to be successful, the practice must find a way for it to be easily found by consumers on the Internet. How consumers search for and find information online has, in the past, been a very confusing topic. This paper will attempt to help simplify this topic and demystify how information is presented on the Internet for consumers to peruse.

The Advent of the Search Engine

Unless a consumer knows the domain name (web address) of the practice web site and can type it into the URL address bar, he or she must use a search engine to find it. Search engines were created to help web “surfers” find web sites whose specific web site domain name they did not know. Yahoo! was the first major search engine to create a database of web sites for specific topics; each of the web sites was categorized by “key words.” For the first time, web surfers were able to receive a listing of web sites related to their topic of choice by typing a key word or key word phrase into a search engine search box. Yahoo!’s success created an explosion of search engines. Over the last four to five years, a new industry has emerged whose sole purpose is to aid businesses in building visibility on the Internet through these search engines.

Unfortunately, considerable confusion surrounds the techniques used for building Internet visibility. Many Internet development firms have successfully harnessed this confusion to portray the Internet as a mystical creature that can only be tamed and conquered through secret schemes and proprietary programming. But contrary to this hastily accepted urban myth, the techniques used in building visibility are relatively easy to understand. They all belong to one of three straightforward categories, thus the title of this paper: Three Ways to be Found on the Internet. This paper will describe each of these categories in detail.

What Consumers Search for

To understand the three methods of being found on the Internet, it is first necessary to understand how consumers search for information related to dental care online. It is a common misconception that consumers who are considering undergoing an elective dental procedure go straight to searching the Internet for local dentists. The truth is that consumers usually begin their search by typing the name of the *procedure* (or dental care issue) into the search box at one of the big search engines. In fact, 95% of the health care searches on the Internet involve what are termed “root words.” Root words are specific health care terms of interest to consumers, such as “dental implants,” “teeth whitening,” or “cosmetic dentistry.” Once a consumer has learned about the dental issue of interest and has decided on a particular procedure or treatment option, he or she typically proceeds to choose a dentist. However, consumers do not start by searching for local dentists when they are interested in a procedure or a dental care issue.

Root words are very broad terms. Only 5% of dental care searches fall under the category of “specific searches,” such as “Kansas City cosmetic dentistry” or “Dallas veneers.” The reason

that specific searches account for such a small portion of the overall search traffic in a given area is clear: before a consumer decides to have a procedure done, he or she wants to gather the widest range of information possible. In other words, the consumer is more apt to search for “veneers” than “Dallas veneers.” As such, to get local patients from the Internet, a practice must provide general information on the procedures it offers. If the practice web site provides this information and the consumer is then impressed with the web site and the dentist, there is a high likelihood that the consumer will be converted to a patient.

Keeping in mind what prospective patients search for on the Internet, as outlined above, the remainder of this paper will highlight the three ways for web sites to be found: permanent paid advertising, auctioned listings, and non-permanent listings (also commonly called free listings). To understand the way these work, it is necessary to understand how they were created through the evolution of the Internet. Since non-permanent listings were the first to be created, they are discussed first here. However, it should be noted that currently, permanent paid advertising appears at the top of search engine results pages, followed by auctioned listings and non-permanent listings.

Three Ways to Be Found on the Internet

1) Non-Permanent Listings (also referred to as free listings): *1. Term used to describe a listing position on a search engine that is randomly chosen by either a computer program or a human editor. 2. Typically the last to be listed from the top of the page on a key word search.*

The Internet originally evolved as a research tool that connected universities and research laboratories. It allowed collaborating teams to easily view or download data from the web sites of research partners around the world. The birth of the Internet was controlled by technology gurus who did not anticipate the vast commercial implications of the Web and the number of web sites that would eventually come to be. As more and more web sites were placed online, it became more difficult to navigate and obtain information. The above referenced attempts on the part of tech gurus to develop techniques to address this led to the development of Yahoo! and other search engines, which allowed any Internet user to search for information on the Internet using key words. Since research personnel liked to think of the Internet as a grand technology that should be free for everyone, they coined the phrase “free listings” to refer to the list of web sites that appeared in response to each search.

These free listings exist to this day and, in some cases, still help consumers find practice web sites. But the term “free listings” is now an anachronism, as anyone attempting to develop an Internet strategy quickly learns. These days, getting listed in a prominent position on the search engines unfortunately requires a significant financial investment.

As previously stated, an overwhelming majority of the searches on the Internet look for root terms. Obtaining root term free listings for the practice web site is difficult and costly. In fact, typically a practice or business has to hire an external marketing firm or focus considerable employee time to perform this task. It is important to note that three search engines, MSN,

Yahoo!, and Google, dominate the consumer searches related to elective, fee-for-service medicine; the vast majority of people utilizing these search engines only view the first eight to ten listings on the first results page of a key word search. Consequently, there are only 24 to 30 prime listings for each search term. And there are literally tens of thousands of cosmetic and general dentistry practices worldwide competing for them.

Even if a prominent search engine listing is obtained, there is no guarantee that it will remain prominent over time. Search engines routinely rotate different web sites through these positions. They do this because, just like any other business, they are in business to make money. They make no money by allowing one web site to appear day after day, year after year, in the same top position, without paying for it. Search engines have absolutely no reason to allow web site owners to build their businesses through permanent, prominent, “free” listings. On the contrary, they constantly change the methods and programs used to rank and position web sites listed in the search results. Since there are so many different web sites to choose from on any given topic, it is easy for the search engines to continually find new web sites to rotate into the prominent positions. Furthermore, every search engine is different and applies completely different methods to rank sites. Just because a site has a prominent position on one search engine, this does not guarantee similar standing with the other search engines. Finally, even if a practice does manage to corner the market on one root term related to its area of dentistry, what about all the others? To be effective using this strategy, a practice web site needs to be easily found under a variety of key words. Cosmetic dentists want to be found not just by consumers who type in the word “cosmetic dentistry,” but also by those who type in “teeth whitening” and “porcelain veneers.” Therefore, the practice must have a strategy specific to each of these key words. This is a very daunting task.

One final caveat – ultimately, most consumers seek dental care locally (within an hour or two of their home or work place). As a result, the vast majority of Internet traffic generated from prominent listings on root terms, which are searched by consumers all over the country, will not generate patient volume unless the practice draws from a wide area or has a national image. Therefore, even if the practice is able to obtain prominent listings for the most heavily searched terms, any traffic generated from these listings may have questionable value as a tool to build patient volume. All this amounts to a powerful argument against trying to build patient volume through free listings on root terms. Getting positioned prominently is time consuming, expensive, and most importantly, temporary. The bottom line is that “free listings” are neither free nor permanent. These listings should be referred to as “non-permanent” or “rotating” listings.

To be most effective in terms of both cost and outcome, a practice that truly wishes to develop a strategy for non-permanent listings should focus its efforts on what are called “specific searches.” There are many fewer practices competing for the prominent search engine listings for these searches and, as such, the cost to obtain them is minimal when compared to the root words. For example, there may be as many as 20,000 practices competing for top search engine positions for the root word “cosmetic dentistry” and only 10 to 20 competing for the term “Denver cosmetic dentistry.” Also, it is easier to keep prominent positions for these specific searches on a more permanent basis because there are fewer practice web sites for the search engines to rotate. Positioning the practice web site for these types of searches is also cost-

effective because most of them are made by consumers who reside close to the practice. But of course, there are far fewer searches on these specific terms, and the absolute number of patients obtained from positioning on them is typically quite low.

In summary, the term “free listings” is misleading and outdated. These listings are extremely costly to obtain for the root search terms. Free listings are really “non-permanent” listings that are arbitrarily selected. The most cost-effective practice strategy for non-permanent listings is to focus on the specific search terms. And although specific search terms generate far fewer visitors, the likelihood of converting each visitor is much higher than for root words.

2) Auctioned Listings: *1. Term used for listings most commonly associated with Overture.com (formerly known as GoTo) and also known as Sponsored Matches or Cost-Per-Click Listings (because owner of web site is charged each time the listing is “clicked”). 2. Term used to describe a listing position on a search engine that is obtained by the highest bidders on each key word search. 3. Listings positioned just below permanent paid advertising listings, which always appear at the top of the page.*

Within the last two years, visibility has been created on the Internet by a new type of listing called the “auctioned listing.” These are listings that can be purchased on a temporary basis by bidding on key words. The highest bidder gets the top listing position on the search engine results page for that key word, the second highest bidder gets the second highest position, and so forth. Each time a web surfer clicks on the listing, the high bidder must pay the winning bid price. Auctioned listings are sometimes referred to as “cost-per-click” listings. Say a practice web site bids \$1.00 on the search term “Nashville cosmetic dentistry.” If this is the highest bid, the practice’s listing will appear as the top listing on the search engine results page for that search term, and every time the web site link is “clicked,” the practice will be charged \$1.00. Typically, the search engines take a deposit on the practice credit card and then debit the account each time one of the auctioned listings is clicked.

Overture.com (formerly known as GoTo.com) is the most well known search engine for auctioned listings. “Overture” has now purchased high visibility positions on several other search engines so that when a web site is positioned as the number one listing on Overture.com, it is also positioned as the top listing on other search engines, under a category called “sponsored matches.” On some search engines, such as Yahoo!, these sponsored matches appear at the very top of the page and on other search engines, such as MSN or AltaVista, they appear in the upper portion of the page, beneath the “featured sites.” Overture listings normally have good placement for visibility, regardless of the search engine. [To see these sponsored matches for yourself, first go to Yahoo! and type in the word “cosmetic dentistry” in the search box on the homepage. Under sponsored matches, three will appear. Write down the web addresses of those listings. Then, visit Overture.com and type in the word “cosmetic dentistry” again. Notice that the top three listings are the same three listings that appeared on Yahoo!. Also note the number in blue at the end of each listing on Overture. This represents the current bid price for the top listing. If you want to place your site as the first listing on Overture.com, all you have to do is bid at least one cent higher than the current top listing. (Of course, each time a surfer clicks on your listing, you will be charged that bid price.)]

Do Not Purchase Auctioned Root Terms

Considerable excitement has arisen concerning auctioned listings because of the misconception that auctioned root terms can be used to build patient volume. That is, people believe that a practice can create higher patient volume by bidding on the root search terms, thereby placing the web site listing high on the sponsored matches portion of the search engine. But bidding on auctioned root terms is every bit as *ineffective* as attempting to gain local traffic from root terms in the free listings. While national chains or practices that draw from a wide area may benefit from auctioned listings for root terms, local practices will not. As described earlier, most consumers obtain dental care locally. Generating worldwide traffic for a root search term does not translate into more patients. Also, remember that most consumer searches conducted using root terms are made by consumers wanting to learn about a procedure or dental care issue. If a practice web site is listed high on the search engines, then it is likely that many consumers will click on this listing to learn about the procedure. But the practice is paying each time a consumer clicks into the web site. Root terms can be very expensive, and they will continue to become more expensive. (For example, the cost per click for “lasik” has been as high as \$10.00. In the field of law, where Internet competition is perhaps the greatest, some of the root word terms have a cost-per-click as high as \$50.00).

The idea of bidding on root terms becomes particularly unattractive when you consider the fact that the consumers clicking in do not come from your local area. Some practices have tried to eliminate the clicks of non-local consumers by describing the location of the practice in the listing (for example, “Specializing in Cosmetic Dentistry in the Bay Area”). But this strategy overlooks one of the fundamental tenets of dental care and the Internet: that is, when searching for information about a procedure or dental care issue, consumers are not looking for dentists themselves, but rather information provided by those dentists. As a result, it does not matter how the link reads. These consumers will click the top listings no matter what. This is because they have learned through experience that search engines are extremely efficient at locating information appropriate to their search. So it does not matter whether the top listing on Google reads “Teeth Whitening Information” or “Specializing in Cosmetic Dentistry in the Bay Area.” While most procedure-hungry consumers prefer to get information from local dentists, ultimately they click on prominent listings because they think search engines do a good job of providing information that is applicable to their search.

As with the non-permanent listings, the most cost-effective means of building visibility using the auctioned listings is to purchase specific search terms, e.g. “Kansas City Veneers” or “Ohio Dental Implants.” The specific searches are typically much less expensive per click than the root terms and the value of each click to the practice is much higher because the consumer is local and can be more readily converted to a patient. On the flip side, like non-permanent listings, the number of consumers using these specific searches is quite low.

In summary, any practice can obtain high visibility for their web site by simply placing the web site in a prominent position within the auctioned listings. The key to using this visibility tool in a cost-effective manner is to ensure that the search terms bid on by the practice are likely to generate practice visibility from local consumers. Visibility on the root terms will not accomplish this and will therefore not lead to higher patient volume. Bidding on specific search terms can be much more cost-effective, but the total traffic for them is still very low and they should therefore

not be relied upon to generate a lot of traffic to the practice web site. Also, as the market for specific searches matures, the cost for these auctioned listings will skyrocket, just as it did for the root terms.

3) Permanent Paid Advertising: *Key word advertising that is purchased directly from a search engine via an annual contract. 2. Term used to describe a 100% guaranteed key word-based listing position on a search engine that is obtained by a third party (i.e. Einstein Dental or Barnes & Noble). 3. Advertisements placed at the top of the search page above all other types of listings.*

The third method of attaining Internet visibility – and by far the most powerful – is permanent paid advertising. Permanent paid advertising includes banners, side buttons, featured sites, and sponsored links that appear in prominent locations on each search engine. These are positions purchased using long-term contracts that normally require a minimum monthly budget; for example, Google.com requires \$3,000 minimum per month to purchase advertising on its sponsored links.

Permanent paid advertising provides the only guaranteed method to ensure that a web site has permanent visibility. These paid advertisements appear every time a key word or phrase is typed into the search box. Probably the most well known example of success on the Internet using permanent paid advertising is Amazon.com. Amazon was a little known, warehouse-based book company in Seattle that wanted to gain visibility and grow its business through an Internet strategy. This little company had minimal sales per month until it purchased advertising for the key word term “books” on the Yahoo! search engine. Shortly after the start of permanent paid advertising, the company grew in stature to a level where at one time the total market capitalization was in excess of \$10 billion. This visibility strategy provided Amazon.com the ability to compete directly with the likes of Barnes & Noble and other large bookstore chains.

Of course, some industry insiders contend that banner and other permanent paid advertising is not cost-effective. These sources quote studies that suggest that “click-through rates” (the percentage of time a web surfer clicks on a banner compared to the number of times the banner appears) are very low (below 0.05%). But what they fail to understand is that banners and sponsored links do work effectively when a banner is tied directly to a search term. If a consumer is searching for information about cosmetic dentistry and a banner advertisement for tires or computers appears, it is unlikely that the consumer will click in. However, if a banner appears with text and graphics saying, “Click here to learn about cosmetic dentistry,” the consumer is much more likely to click on the banner. This type of banner advertising is called “targeted banner advertising” and the click-through rates for targeted banner ads are much higher than for non-targeted banner ads. Statistics show that for some highly targeted banners, the click-through rates exceed 12%.

So should a practice purchase banner advertising as a visibility strategy? Once again, while purchasing a permanent advertisement for root terms such as “cosmetic dentistry” or “porcelain veneers” would generate many thousands of visitors to the practice web site, this strategy is problematic because the banners appear worldwide and most practices can only take advantage of the few local patients who click on them.

Since the vast majority of all dental care searches are root word searches such as “teeth whitening” or “dental implants,” web surfers will click into the web sites where they think they are most likely to get that procedural information. The key is to convince *local* consumers that the practice web site is the place. Enter the directories.

Directories serve an absolutely crucial function because they drive local consumers who type in root terms to the web sites of local dentists. The various ads purchased by directories with permanent positioning collect all consumers interested in dental procedures or health care issues and distribute them to the local practice web sites of directory participants. This permanent paid advertising for root words allows directory participants to take advantage of the high number of consumers who search using root terms, while paying a very small portion of the total cost for these terms. Moreover, because of the geography-based structure of directories, unwanted nationwide traffic is eliminated and desirable local traffic is received.

Remember that the practice web site should provide educational information about relevant procedures if it enlists the services of a directory. It is a waste of money to invest in bringing local consumers to a practice web site without including the type of dental care information they are seeking. This may cause them to simply leave the web site.

Permanent paid advertising is the only way to guarantee permanent visibility on the Internet. If a directory has permanent placement for root terms, local practices can take advantage of the high traffic generated by these terms.

ⁱ A comprehensive Internet strategy includes five key components: 1) an effect practice web site, 2) a means to build visibility for “root search terms,” 3) a means to build visibility for specific search terms, 4) an email software program to capture and optimize email correspondence and 5) a strategy to integrate Internet marketing throughout the practice. These components will be discussed in detail in another paper.

Other Einstein Publications:

Evans, Dr. David W. "SEO: Buyer Beware," ed. Nathan Johnson (San Diego: Einstein Publishing, 2002).

Evans, Dr. David W. "Creating an Effective Website," ed. Nathan Johnson (San Diego: Einstein Publishing, 2002).

Silkey, Robert C. "The Five Essential Components of an Effective Internet Strategy," ed. Nathan Johnson (San Diego: Einstein Publishing, 2002).

Upcoming Publications...

HIPAA Compliancy and the Internet, by Robert C. Silkey. (Scheduled for publication in 2004.)

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