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Tooth in Advertising

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For Comfort Dental, the way to cut its teeth on Internet marketing last summer was simple: Start a blog.

"People are searching for things in a way they weren't a few years ago," says Ali Sales, co-founder and president of Compendium Blogware. "[Comfort Dental] didn't have a Web site presence, so they knew they were missing out even on the most basic levels."

"It seems like every dental practice on the planet has a Web site," says Dr. Dean Stratman, owner of Comfort Dental. "A blog was a way for us to differentiate ourselves."

Today the practice has its own site ([www.yousleepwework.com](http://www.yousleepwework.com)). "But initially we saw blogs as the easiest way to get to the top of Google listings," he says. "If somebody types in 'Dentist, Anderson, IN,' I want to be on the first page."

Unlike many first-time bloggers, Comfort Dental wasn't just looking to drive brand awareness and create thought leadership. Rather, it had the concrete goal of boosting new patient traffic. And, Sales notes, since people typically don't change doctors unless they go through a life-changing event such as moving to a new area, the lifetime value of a new patient is many years of repeat visits.

Not many dentists have delved into the blogosphere yet, she adds; many still stick to the yellow pages. "The industry isn't nearly as progressed in this as say, real estate agents. Dentists are just starting to realize the Web's potential."

Indeed, Stratman says, Comfort Dental has spent millions on yellow pages advertising. At various times over the past 15 years the company has operated 23 dental offices, but all were sold except for the current practice. "We've always been a big yellow pages and newspaper marketer, and we tried commercials and even hot-air balloons."

Three dentists are contributing to the blog, updating it a few times a month. No promotion is being done, but the blog is still accomplishing its main purpose: search rankings are climbing.

"It's interesting to see how far this is carrying them," Sales says, adding that, of course, blogs need to be updated regularly to stay effective as search engine drivers.

"We're a pretty busy practice. We're not out there pushing [the blog] at

all," Stratman says.

The most popular search terms aren't too surprising — words like "dental office," "tooth whitening" and "sedation dentistry," all paired with "Anderson, IN."

Stratman notes that his company also maintains a blog through Compendium for The Stratman Center, a snoring and sleep-apnea treatment facility. The dentists aren't bothered that their posts don't draw many comments. They see the blog as strictly informational rather than as a relationship-building tool, and aren't interested in building an online communications forum for the practice.

"That's not what I'm looking for," he says. "If patients have questions, I want them in my office."

Stratman is, however, getting questions via e-mail from current and prospective patients. "It helps them to feel like they have a relationship with us before they walk in the door."

The number of new patients generated and the type of patient attracted is how ROI is being evaluated. All the people who've contacted the practice via the blog have converted to patients. Stratman estimates that about five to eight come in each month. While that doesn't sound huge, he's happy with the numbers.

"We're not giving away cotton candy on the corner, so we don't have 500 people coming up," he jokes. "But we're consistently getting a couple of patients a week who've been out researching for things like dental implants, a full-mouth reconstruction or a particular service like sedation dentistry."

As for offline promotion, you name it and over the years Comfort Dental has done it. One example? "We've hired people to wear giant tooth costumes and stand on the corner," Stratman says.

Indeed, the practice in its various incarnations has tried television, radio, print and a little direct mail, usually in co-ops like Valpak, where other dentists' ads were in the envelope as well.

"But we want to stand out and do something different," he concludes. "We don't want to be advertising the same way other people are."