

A Short Course in

BRANDING

Your Practice

Everywhere we go, we're inundated by brands. With the rise of brands on social media, the prevalence of advertising, and the use of ads to monetize everything we see online, traditional marketing is nearly impossible to escape. In an age when 89% of patients research their physicians online before scheduling an appointment or coming in for a visit, physicians need to take a hard, strategic look at their brands and think about how they can stand out from the crowd. This crash course will give you the foundation you need to understand brand strategy, the importance of design, the power of marketing, and SEO best practices.

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1

IT'S TIME TO RETHINK YOUR BRAND STRATEGY

The most common misconception when it comes to branding is that a brand is just a logo. When you think about some of the world's most well-known brands, such as Apple, Nike, or McDonald's, what comes to mind? Their logos.

This is normal. It's how the human brain works; 80% of all information we consume is processed visually, so when we bring a certain organization to mind, we often think of a symbol (ie, logo) first. For these companies, their symbols have become so inextricably linked with their brand that they'd be foolish to ditch that brand equity. But that doesn't mean a brand is only a logo.

SO, WHAT IS A BRAND?

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods

and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers."

But I like to go a little further: I define a brand as the sum total of every interaction or touchpoint people have with your business, regardless of their relationship with your business.

By this definition, your logo is a part of your brand—as is your website, your name, your practice's office, your staff, and even small factors such as the average time a patient has to wait before being seen for his or her appointment.

How you answer your phone is part of your brand. How your office looks is also part of your brand. Your practice hasn't tweeted in 9-plus months? Guess what? That is part of your brand.

Good branding isn't about what colors your logo uses (Figure 1) or how flashy your website is; it starts with patient experience, or how people feel when they interact with your business.

It's also important to note that good branding isn't just for the benefit

of your current patients. Under this definition of branding, your brand is affected by current and prospective patients, employees, vendors, and, yes, even complete outsiders. Portraying a consistent, reliable message to long-time patients and outsiders alike is an important part of good branding.



Figure 1. Some brands have great logos, like Nike or Apple, while others have logos that are jarring (top) or downright lazy (bottom).



Whether you eat at McDonald's daily or haven't had fast food in years, you have a relationship with the McDonald's brand. And whether you have the newest iPhone or use a pre-paid Go Phone, you have a relationship with Apple because you see the company in a certain way, regardless of whether you use its products or not. Big brands like McDonald's and Apple understand this, and, as a physician, you should, too.

WHY PRACTICE BRANDING IS IMPORTANT

If we define your practice's brand as the sum of all touchpoints that patients and potential patients have with you, a more comprehensive approach is necessary. In branding, the name of the game is consistency.

If you want patients to have a good experience, your message and experience must be unwaveringly consistent across all touchpoints. There are several steps to ensuring that your brand is exceeding patient expectations and delivering a consistent experience.

STEP NO. 1: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE AND YOURSELF

First, consider who you're serving. If your practice focuses primarily on LASIK, you will likely want to focus your attention on a younger audience, most likely millennials. Consider their needs and desires when building your practice brand. What do they want a doctor's office to look and feel like? How can you use technology to help them through the surgical process?

If your practice is catering to older generations seeking refractive surgery, the same considerations apply. Will they place a premium on human interaction over the ease of technology? How can you train your office staff to educate patients on their procedures, the risks, surgical outcomes, and the like?

Building a premium lens practice? Plan so that your message, your

KNOW THYSELF

Take time to assess how your practice is measuring up against brand benchmarks you've set.

- ▶ What are patients saying about your practice online?
- ▶ What feedback has your staff been receiving?
- ▶ Are there any points at which practice-patient communication breaks down?
- ▶ What do patients not understand about your practice, their surgery, or anything else?
- ▶ What are the most frequently asked questions your office staff has to answer about surgical procedures? About insurance? About appointments?

materials, the education and rhetoric of your office staff, and everything in between conveys a consistent message. How do your office procedures and educational initiatives support patients so they feel shepherded through the surgical process, rather than being left to fend for themselves?

We all know these aspects of running a practice are incredibly important, but it's not often that we sit down and assess how we're actually doing. It is advisable to conduct a practice audit at least once a year (see *Know Thyself*). By collecting real data about your practice and the unique challenges it faces, you'll be able to see how you're measuring up to the goals you've set to convey a consistent message and provide a consistent experience.

STEP NO. 2: WHY PERSONAL BRANDING IS IMPORTANT

Whether you're the sole ophthalmologist at your own practice or one on a team of many, personal branding is another crucial factor that plays into practice branding. From day 1, you're selling. Too many people don't realize the impact that their actions, words, and lifestyle have on the places they work. The way you treat people (both in and out of your practice),

how you communicate, the messages you tweet—all of these elements have an impact on how patients perceive you and, by extension, your practice. As the saying goes, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." This is especially true in personal and practice branding because you never know when someone is watching.

Remember how I said that you have a relationship with Apple, even if you don't use Apple products? The same is true for your prospective patients: They have a relationship with your practice (via their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions) whether they've come in for surgery or not.

Just as that new iPhone billboard hanging above the freeway is a touchpoint for Apple, you are a touchpoint for your practice. The people you come into contact with on a daily basis are interacting with your brand, although they may not know it. Even if you're one of many ophthalmologists at a larger practice, you are still your own brand, and, as we learned before, every touchpoint matters.

To make the most impact, every piece of a brand has to function correctly. Take some time to evaluate and audit your brand, identifying strengths and areas for improvement.



2

TAKE A THOUGHTFUL APPROACH TO DESIGN

Upon hearing the word *design*, many people think of architecture, graphic design, or the consumer products we use every day. But design is all around us. Nearly everything you come into contact with—from the newspaper you read in the morning with your cup of coffee, to the coffee cup itself, to the Keurig machine used to prepare it—has been designed. Design is not limited just to the products we use; it also applies to our experiences. Have you ever attended an incredible concert? Design, in part, was responsible. Have you ever had a terrible experience at the DMV? Design (or lack thereof) played a part.

Humans love order. It is hardwired in our brains. Whether we realize it or not, we enjoy finding patterns and other ways to help us translate the world around us, especially when we encounter something unfamiliar. Although some people are more right-brained and creative than others, order, hierarchy, and other psychological methods of translation are still important.

Think about stop lights. Every stop light in the United States has the exact same order and design: red on the top, green on the bottom, yellow in the middle. Although this consistency is merely convenient for most of us, there is incredible intentionality behind the design that is vital for others. Because some people are red-green colorblind, it is crucial that the red lights and green lights are always in the same place.

The consequences of inconsistent or thoughtless design would be disastrous.

Good, thoughtful design understands and takes into account the ways in which our brains process information and makes the object of design as easy to understand as possible. There are many psychological elements that come into play.

However, when I say that design is psychological, this does not mean you should use psychology to trick

SMART WEB DESIGN

When designing a practice website, important considerations include:

- Making sure your website is mobile-friendly;
- Organizing information so that it is easy to locate, both within the website and in the top navigation;
- Ensuring that visual elements and typography are organized in a clear visual hierarchy;
- Ensuring that all graphics, images, and other visual elements are consistent with your branding, including having a similar color scheme;
- Implementing clear calls to action so that the patient knows what to do next (ie, is it idiot-proof?); and
- Making your website's content easy to understand. If your homepage is filled with medical jargon, you may scare people away. Focus on the benefit to your patients, not on the complicated medical procedures you need to get them there.

people into coming to your practice; rather, you should be intentional about assisting prospective patients in every way possible, as they are making life-changing decisions and are likely unfamiliar with the process.

Design helps us translate the world around us by making unfamiliar experiences easier to comprehend. This is especially important in the medical field, where the average person may be confused about the medical situation he or she is facing, the treatment options available, and what the process of care will look like. You must also factor unique circumstances into the design of your patient experience—after all, elderly cataract patients struggling with their vision may have considerations and concerns different from those of millennials seeking LASIK.

TELL YOUR STORY

Good branding is all about telling an authentic and consistent story. Applied to design, this means that every aspect of your practice must tell the same story. It is a well-understood principle in the design industry that the function of any given object should inform the design of that object. Applied to your practice, this can be done in many ways. If the goal of your website is to attract new leads through content generation, a blog would be an important

component. If you want patients to spend a minimal amount of time in your waiting room, then focusing on staffing and patient wait time would be a vital piece of your practice design. Although many physicians don't think of designing the experience of being in their office, many do consider the design of their website, their business cards, and their marketing. Let's take a look at those elements.

YOUR WEBSITE

There are certainly best practices when it comes to designing a website with your patients in mind (see *Smart Web Design*). We have all visited websites that were hard to navigate, didn't perform well on mobile devices, or didn't seem to have the information we were looking for.

Remember that less is more. The simpler it is for patients to find what they are looking for, the better the experience they will have on your website and the more positive they will feel about your brand.

YOUR MARKETING

Your website is arguably the first and most integral component of your marketing. Chances are it is the first place that many patients will go to find information about you. However, your marketing channels are a much more comprehensive picture of your practice.



Figure 2. The typical waiting room (left) versus one with a thoughtful design (right).

Following are some questions to ask when making a holistic assessment of your marketing:

- Are you taking advantage of the different platforms available, or are you marketing via only one channel?
- Is your messaging consistent across all platforms?
- Are you considering the different audiences you are catering to on different platforms? Facebook and newspaper advertisements may be effective media to reach older audiences, but are you attracting the younger crowd on Instagram?
- Is your branding visible and consistent across all marketing efforts?
- Is your advertising measurable? You cannot expect to just throw your marketing out there and hope something sticks. If the most aesthetically beautiful ad that has ever been made doesn't drive sales, it's not good marketing; you must have a way to measure the results and make adjustments if necessary.

YOUR PRACTICE

If you've been to one doctor's office, you've been to them all. They're filled with uncomfortable chairs that cram people together like sardines, old mangled issues of *Newsweek* and *National Geographic* on a coffee table, and more than a few patients silently praying that someone doesn't take the seat next to them. That is the typical waiting room. It is not well thought out. There is no intention or personality. Your appointment is an obligation, not a delight. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Design prompts the question, "Do I want my practice to feel like every other medical clinic out there? What can I do to make this experience unique and memorable?" What if you could make your patients' visits the most enjoyable part of their day? Of the images in Figure 2, which waiting room would you rather be in?

Not only is thoughtful design important when it comes to your website and marketing (digital and otherwise), but the design of your physical practice is just as meaningful. As Swartz noted in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, "Poor design may cost you patients."¹ Following are some elements of your physical practice to take into consideration:

- What is a patient's experience from the moment he or she walks in the door? Have a policy in place that dictates how a patient is greeted, establishes what steps he or she must take before being seen for an appointment, and sets goals for average wait time.
- Are your business hours competitive?
- What is your office forms policy? Do patients have to fill them out in the office, or can they complete them online before their visit?
- Do you play music in your waiting room? If so, what type?
- Do you have an option for patients to pay online?
- What is the furniture in your waiting room like? What magazines are on the coffee tables?

THOUGHTFUL DESIGN MATTERS

Thoughtful design takes into account the experience of a product and asks "Why?" to nearly every aspect of that interaction. It may seem silly to so carefully consider all the fine details; you may even be wondering, "Does this even matter?"

Yes, it does. Think of your last visit to the Apple Store. Every Apple Store is, more or less, exactly the same, from the overall layout down to the floor. Next time you visit the Genius Bar, look down: The flooring in all 450-plus Apple Stores worldwide is identical. Not only is it blue sandstone; it all comes from a single family-owned quarry outside of Florence, Italy.

There is little debate that Steve Jobs understood the power and importance of a consistent customer experience. Although his hyperobsessive personality may not be the best example to follow, you certainly can't say he wasn't thoughtful about the design of his stores.

It is important to consider the fine details of your patient experience. If the surgeon down the road is over-looking it, that is an opportunity for you to set yourself apart.

Although many physicians may only think of their logo or their website when they think of design and branding, good, thoughtful experience design is much more than that. By taking a holistic approach to your practice design, both in the digital and physical realms, you will be able to provide patients with a more thoughtful, consistent, and authentic experience.



3

MARKETING IS A MICROPHONE, NOT A MEGAPHONE

Ah, *marketing*: one of the most misunderstood words in the English language. When uttered, it may evoke mental images of used car salesmen, flashy neon lights on the Vegas Strip, or even commercials featuring talkative camels.

But true marketing is much more than that. Marketing, if done correctly, is a powerful force that can help organizations engage with their customers in meaningful ways. It is about connecting emotionally with consumers—or rather, forming such a deep relationship with them that they cease to be just numbers on a spreadsheet and become deeply loyal proponents of your brand.

WHAT MARKETING IS NOT

Before we can understand what good marketing looks like, it is important to first understand what marketing is *not*. Let's dispel some rumors. *Marketing* is not a dirty word. It is not the used car salesman or the incessant TV commercials for mesothelioma settlements. Many people cringe when

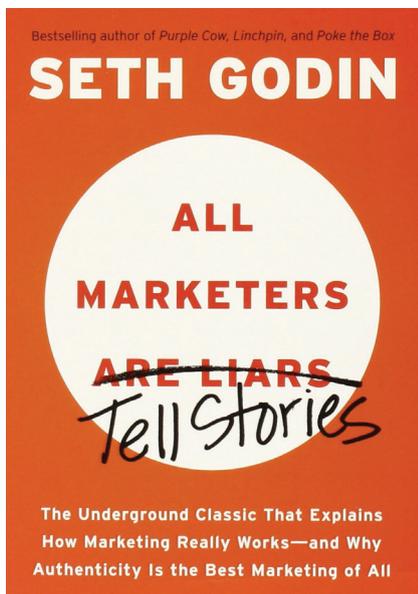


Figure 3. Good marketing starts with a story.



Figure 4. Humor and shock are two tactics that marketers use to get attention. Perhaps not appropriate in every situation, but it got your attention, didn't it?

they hear that someone works in marketing—and understandably so; we have been conditioned to believe that all marketing is spammy and obtrusive. Nothing could be further from the truth. Good marketing is not harassment; it is relational.

That does not mean we need to limit marketing to telling feel-good, heartwarming stories. However, the stories we tell must connect with our audience on some level, and that is why all marketing must start with a story.

WHAT MARKETING IS

Seth Godin, one of the best-known marketers of our time, sums it up well when he says, "All marketers are storytellers" (Figure 3). Good marketing starts with your story—not just what you do, but why you exist. These stories must be authentic and consistent, and they must explain the *why*—or the reason you get out of bed in the morning.

Rather than a megaphone used to yell at everyone who passes by, good marketing is a microphone. Good marketing doesn't just tell your story; it lends your customers a voice and invites them to share stories of their own and become part of your story by doing so.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

First impressions are key because many customers make decisions and snap judgments with almost no data, and they generally stick to the instant

conclusions they draw. It has been said that, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression," and this is perhaps truer in marketing than anywhere else. Marketers use many techniques to establish a good first impression: humor (Figure 4), suspense, and heartwarming stories, to name a few. Regardless of the approach, you must viscerally connect with your audience in an instant.

AUTHENTICITY

If a first impression is what gets your audience's attention and prompts their snap judgment, authenticity is what builds brand loyalty. Telling an authentic, coherent story across all touchpoints of your brand is the only way to build trust with your audience.

What is a key way to build customer trust that many marketers overlook? *Doing the right thing*. It doesn't feel like marketing, but it is a hugely important piece of retaining customers and building trust and camaraderie.

When a patient complains, address his or her concerns. When someone leaves a negative review online, pick up the phone to give him or her an easier outlet to communicate those frustrations. Showing patients that you care about them and want to improve their experiences is just as important as communicating your surgical expertise or optimizing marketing channels. At the end of the day, your patients don't care how much you know if they don't know how much you care.



BELIEF SYSTEMS

There are three common ways to position a brand: (1) product attributes, (2) product benefits, and (3) product beliefs and values.

Product attributes. At the attribute level, there isn't much room for improvement, as any competitor can copy the attributes of your product. This is for commodities. No one diaper or paper towel can truly provide that much more benefit than the others—they all copy each other and use catchy phrases and cheap tricks (eg, *New and Improved!*) to get customers to open their wallets.

Product benefits. Product benefits offer slightly more leeway, as they focus on the desired advantage. It is no longer about what the product *is* but what the product *does* and what it can do for the customer. This is where most ophthalmologists stop. It is not just about the fancy femtosecond laser but about the fact that it can help the elderly man see his grandson's tee-ball games again.

Product beliefs and values. The deepest and most effective way to position a brand is through product beliefs and values. Tesla is the perfect example of this. While some Tesla owners enjoy their cars just as much as the next person, a large subset *raves* about their cars. These Tesla owners are deeply committed to saving the environment and reducing their carbon footprint. Custom



Figure 5. The Tesla brand has built a base of loyal customers with shared beliefs and values.

license plates like, "LOLWATT" or "THXELON" or "CYA OPEC" (Figure 5) can be seen. If you meet one of these proud individuals at a cocktail party, you'll know.

Tesla has become a love mark—a product that evokes delight and inspires loyalty beyond reason. Love marks start with a mission and vision, a belief system about the world. Tesla starts with beliefs; they start with *why*.

HOW OPHTHALMOLOGY HAS GOTTEN MARKETING WRONG

Like it or not, most ophthalmologists tend to think marketing is all about optimizing ad spend, tailoring social media platforms, and boosting physician referrals and comanagement structures. Although these activities are important, there is much more to it than that.

When clients forget the most important, strategic aspects that comprise a good marketing plan in favor of the specific tactics, we like to call it *marketing myopia*—focusing only on the story you want to tell rather than the story the patient needs to hear. This must be the first issue addressed in the quest for effective marketing.

It is all too easy for ophthalmologists to be so enamored with the latest technology, the best surgical techniques, or tactics to get the most marketing bang for their buck that they forget the true reason they exist and the true selling point of their practices: to improve quality of life by restoring vision. That is why you get out of bed in the morning.

ANATOMY OF A GOOD MARKETING STRATEGY

To avoid marketing myopia and use smart marketing to your advantage, you must start by reframing your mindset about marketing. A basic marketing plan follows the framework below:

No. 1: Begin with an overarching story (why).

No. 2: Develop a specific message about that story (how you do what you do).

"STRIVE TO GIVE YOUR PATIENTS A MICROPHONE TO VOICE THEIR FEARS, HOPES, AND DESIRES, AND YOU WILL NEVER CONSIDER MARKETING A DIRTY WORD AGAIN; IN TURN, YOUR PATIENTS WILL NOT EVEN REALIZE THEY ARE BEING MARKETED TO."

No. 3: Analyze the following factors (what): segmentation of your audience, differentiation of your product (price, service, or benefits); and communication of that message. The four primary ways to segment your audience are by geography (regions, states, cities); demographics (age, life-cycle stage, gender, income); psychographics (social class, lifestyle choices, personality); and behavior (occasions, benefits, user status, loyalty status).

The five main ways to differentiate your offering include product differentiation (different features, performance, or style and design); service differentiation (speedy, convenient, or careful delivery); channel differentiation (the channel's coverage, expertise, and performance); people differentiation (hiring and training better people); and image differentiation (strong and distinctive image that conveys a product's benefits and positioning).

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Let's say you want to market your LASIK services and engage younger



generations. Here is what an effective approach might look like:

1. **Overarching story:** “Your vision is a crucial part of your lifestyle, and you deserve better than glasses. We want to help you live your best life.”
2. **Specific message:** “With LASIK, we can help you eliminate the need for glasses or contacts and help you live the life you have always dreamed of. It is safe, convenient, and a decision that will benefit you for the rest of your life.”
3. **Analysis:** Your analysis should address the following questions:
 - **Who is our audience?** For LASIK, the audience is myopic millennials who no longer want to deal with glasses or contacts.
 - **How can we differentiate our product?** We are competitive in our pricing compared with other practices in our area, and our practice caters to millennials by offering a modern atmosphere, state-of-the-art technology, and the ultimate ease of use when it comes to the patient experience. At our practice, LASIK should feel as easy as sending a tweet.
 - **How will we tell that story?** This is where the fun of specific marketing tactics comes in. Tailor and adapt your message to fit your audience’s needs and decide where to tell your story, and which medium to use to do so. These tactics can mean the difference between connecting with your audience or completely flopping.

With careful planning and strategic thinking, you can take your most basic business goal (eg, let us perform your LASIK) and transform it into a meaningful, patient-centric message: “We believe you deserve the best. Your vision is a crucial part of your lifestyle, and you deserve better than glasses. There is something that can help you, called LASIK. With the professional, compassionate doctors in our state-of-the art facility, the LASIK experience is as easy as tweeting.”

FIRST THINGS FIRST

There is a time and a place for measuring ad spend, analytics, and growth on social channels—and there is no doubt it is important. But, if we want to get marketing right, that is not the place to start. If you, as an ophthalmologist, want to get marketing right, forget about restoring vision for a moment and focus on what your patients really want from you.

At the end of the day, the elderly man with the complex cataract does not truly care about seeing 20/20—he just wants to experience his grandson’s tee-ball game. The recent retiree who has had problems with depth perception does not care about your femtosecond laser—she wants to know that she will be able to compete in triathlons again.

Myopic marketing says, “Let’s focus on promoting our new state-of-the-art surgery center.” Authentic marketing says, “Let’s make sure our patients know they are in good hands.”

So, what do your patients believe about themselves? And what do you believe about your patients and your ability to help them?

Strive to give your patients a microphone to voice their fears, hopes, and desires, and you will never consider *marketing* a dirty word again; in turn, your patients will not even realize they are being marketed to.



UNRAVELING THE MYSTERIES OF SEO

If you have a website, you have undoubtedly been introduced to three magic letters: S, E, and O—short for *search engine optimization*. Understanding and harnessing the power of SEO is like the modern-day holy grail of the web: It is elusive, and few people are on the right track. If you have spent any time on the internet, you have likely heard many different opinions and even more so-called *best practices* on how to use SEO, many of which are conflicting.

The balance of this article unravels some of the mysteries surrounding SEO by shedding light on what it is, what it is not, and how it can best be used to improve the visibility of a practice’s website.

WHAT SEO IS

SEO is the process of affecting the visibility of a website or a web page in a search engine’s unpaid results—often referred to as *natural, organic, or earned* results. Most SEO strategies use a combination of keywords, images, links, and social media activity to drive traffic to a certain website; these items are all designed to get the specified web page higher in the list of search engine results (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Most SEO strategies use a combination of keywords, images, links and social media activity to drive traffic.



Good SEO is a way of systematically presenting content on your website so that search engines find that content and present it to users higher up in the list of search results. However, even more important than the search engine finding the content on your website is your website placing the needs of the user above the desires of the search engine.

WHAT SEO IS NOT

Despite the many myths and misconceptions, SEO is not:

- A magic bullet or a catch-all solution;
- A sure-fire way to be first in search rankings;
- An overnight tactic that will instantly drive more traffic to your website; or
- A way to beat the system and achieve higher success.

Google and other search engines have spent hundreds of thousands of man-hours and millions of dollars on developing advanced algorithms that discern what content is most relevant to the user's search and then display the best results to the user. You are not going to get around this and see overnight success with some new SEO trick or best practice that someone sold you on the internet for five easy payments of \$49.95.

HOW SEO WORKS

Let's think about search engines for a second. A search engine is not a real person, but it still must decide what content exists on a website (this is called *crawling* a website), categorize the content and file it away, and then display that content when a user searches for something that may be related (eg, a phrase, the name of a business, an image search).

A good SEO strategy focuses on content. Good SEO will implement a variety of practices to ensure that (1) search engines have the most opportunities possible to categorize their content, and (2) the website has the greatest chance of appearing at the very top of the results when a

user searches for a similar topic. Good SEO strategies will place keyword-rich content on web pages, include links to other websites and other pages within their own website, and use description tags for images and graphic elements so that search engines can classify them.

Seems simple, right? Not so fast—SEO strategy changes a lot.

What SEO used to be. In the past, the internet saw hundreds of so-called *best SEO practices* that ranged from slightly underhanded to downright spammy. When the term *SEO* was first coined, pretty much anything was OK—if you could link to 1,000 different websites from your own, you were virtually guaranteed to be the first hit on a Google search.

These tactics took on a variety of forms, all of which can be categorized as *black hat SEO* (tactics you should avoid), as described below.

- **Keyword stuffing.** Keyword stuffing is an SEO technique used by web designers to overload keywords onto a web page so that search engines read the page as being relevant in a web search. Believe it or not, this practice is still in use today, even though it now hurts your website far more than it helps.
- **Invisible text.** Another black hat SEO practice was to make text almost invisible to the naked eye by adding white text on top of a white page in order to fit more keywords and get a greater chance of being discovered by search engines. Users couldn't see it because it blended in with the background of the page, but search engines could read the code, pick up the text, and file it away to be displayed in search results.
- **Adding unrelated keywords.** Another practice was to add unrelated keywords to increase the likelihood that users would stumble upon a given website even when they searched for something completely unrelated.
- **Page swapping.** Page swapping involved changing the web page

entirely after it had been ranked by search engines, thus trying to “trick” the search engine into displaying a website with unrelated results.

These may seem like quick or easy tricks to game the system and achieve top rankings, but they don't work anymore. In response to the growing number of websites using such methods, Google (in the interest of user experience) changed its algorithms drastically, not just to cease rewarding those sites but to penalize them for using such spammy practices.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OPHTHALMOLOGISTS

SEO isn't dead. There are still many best practices that can be used to form a complete and comprehensive SEO strategy and see great results. These include having a responsive website that works well on mobile devices, adding keyword-rich body copy to your website, linking your social media profiles to your website (and posting regularly), using descriptor tags for images and other graphic elements, and having link-rich content that links to both external websites and other pages within your website.

At the end of the day, it is all about helping search engines understand and correctly categorize what is on your website—and helping users find it by providing an exceptional user experience. Although search engines are not dumb, they aren't humans either, so they need a bit of help.

Content is king. Perhaps the best advice for ophthalmologists is to regularly post and update content on the practice website, most likely through a blog or newsroom of sorts. When it comes to modern SEO, content is king, and there is no better SEO strategy than regularly posting informational, keyword-rich content on a variety of topics to increase the chances that a search engine—or a real person—will stumble upon your message.

Mobile matters. Google recently updated its search engine algorithm to



reward websites that are responsive, or that work well on mobile devices. Again, this is all done in the interest of user experience, and websites that don't display legible fonts and content tailored and optimized for mobile devices will be penalized.

Don't neglect video. In a world where content is king, video is considered *sticky* content—that is, it is more likely to increase user retention over a longer period of time. Consider these statistics:

- Including a video in a landing page can increase conversion by 80%;
- After watching a video, users are 64% more likely to buy a product online; and
- One-third of all online activity is spent watching video.

Ensure your website is up to snuff.

I am often blown away by the number of client websites that don't include any industry-standard best SEO practices. For many ophthalmologists, these standards were not widely adopted when they first created their

practice websites. These include:

- Keyword and description tags;
- Image tags;
- Facebook Open Graph tags and Twitter sharing tags; and
- Links to other websites and other pages within your website.

If your practice website is missing any of these features, contact your web developer and get them added. This is by far the easiest way for Google and other search engines to find you.

Sounds too good to be true? It probably is. Remember that when it comes to SEO, there are no magic bullets. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. The internet is a wonderful place, but it is also full of people and companies promising that they can make you the first hit on a Google search or increase your traffic 200% overnight, and it just isn't true. There is no way to game the system, so don't waste your money.

Good SEO strategy is an investment. It takes time to see a real return on investment on an SEO

strategy, but it's worth it. Hiring an SEO consultant isn't a bad idea *per se*, but be careful about spending too much—especially if his or her services are a one-time thing. The best SEO consultants will adopt a long-term approach, constantly checking in and making adjustments to your website and digital assets over time.

SEO can seem over-complicated, and, if you don't live and breathe the internet 24/7, it is easy to get lost. But good SEO is not that hard to understand—it just takes a methodical, well-thought-out approach; hard work; and a good deal of patience to see a result worth the investment. ■

1. Swartz J. The doctor's office: poor design may cost you patients. *CMAJ*. 1989;140(3):320-321.

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