

The Social Media Influence

By Jennifer Reyes, DDS

Guest Columnist



Social media is changing the way patients interact with their healthcare providers and challenging the boundaries of professionalism. Take, for example, a well-known dermatologist whose Instagram posts and YouTube videos garnered so many followers that she now has both her own line of skincare products and a television show. Instagram and Facebook

are easy, accessible and inexpensive ways to communicate your mission, your work, and ultimately your brand to potential and existing patients. Many companies know this.

It is no surprise social media's rising role as a business/branding platform has necessitated that companies offer marketing and search engine optimization services to dental practices, particularly in New York City and other metropolitan areas. In fact, I recently attended a professional event where the audience was encouraged to hire young dentists with a large number of Instagram followers as this would likely translate to more patients, thus more production, for the owner-doctor. You can even buy social media followers, although the level of engagement is about as questionable as the long-term prognosis of a #16 with grade III mobility.

Some companies have been known to gift medical and dental professionals, even students, with free clothing provided the practitioner/student has sufficient social media clout. This is called "sponcon," short for sponsored content. While accepting a set of fashionable scrubs or two from a charitable clothing company may seem reasonable and innocuous, consider a health-conscious dentist or hygienist who tags a particular brand of protein powder or health supplement. Does this constitute an endorsement of the product in the eyes of our patients and other laypeople, despite not being within our scope of practice? Conversely, how would a patient (or dentist!) react to an MD influencer who posted his or her self-guided clear aligner therapy? And on the rare occasion that a corporation chooses to partner with a practitioner, how do you disclose the relationship to patients, including

those who are not active on social media? Is #ad #partner a sufficient disclosure?

The very word "influencer" suggests that the practice or professional is influencing the population. Make no mistake: this can certainly be a good thing. For example, posting healthy eating habits or educating scrollers (and trollers) about the importance of routine dental cleanings is a positive outcome of social media. I like to think that my staff and I are a key influence in how my patients view their oral healthcare as an important part of their daily lives. While perhaps the best pulpit for patient education is chairside (or #irl), the ability to post daily reminders to brush and floss is a great public service. And with the growth of non-expert experts, the ability to easily and quickly educate non-dentists by posting recordings and live videos of patients undergoing treatment is both educational and valuable.

**According to the
NYSDA Code of Ethics**
“...dentists should represent themselves in a manner that contributes to the esteem of the profession.”

Personally, I have considered sharing my oral hygiene routine via Instagram, as I'm often asked how I care for my teeth. I would not be the first; several dentists share their patients' experiences undergoing treatment as well as product instructions and reviews (see above regarding sponsorship disclosure). Many also use short videos to explain procedures and present cases, as if the audience were perhaps chairside.

While the vast majority of dentists are not social media influencers, each year the US graduates roughly 6,000 new dentists who are increasingly more comfortable with technology. It behooves us as a profession to consider the professional ramifications of using social media as a means to educate and promote our practice, both individually and collectively.

Dental Schools might also consider providing guidance to students on how to navigate the transition from layperson to professional. For instance, how do you respond, or even should you respond, to dentistry-specific questions you receive when you are not yet licensed?

With the average American spending over two hours engaging daily with a social media platform, it is in our interest to post thoughtfully and responsibly. While these can be fun and interactive avenues for connecting with our patients and the public, we should not forget that they are also an extension of our practice, and as such, we should hold our professional social media to a similar standard.