

Social Media Marketing in Facial Plastic Surgery

What Has Worked?



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KEYWORDS

• Social media • Marketing • Facial plastics • Instagram • Facebook • Snapchat

KEY POINTS

- Social media is quickly becoming one of the main avenues for direct to consumer marketing.
- Patients use social media to find surgeons and to communicate about procedures, outcomes, and their experiences.
- A surgeon's social media presence can dramatically increase their perception of being an expert and showcase to patients their style and approach.
- There is no single best social network, instead various networks exist with unique characteristics that each have the potential to drive traffic to a practice.
- Social media can be potentially hazardous for patients and surgeons if misused.

INTRODUCTION

As patients incorporate social media into their daily routine, physicians are increasingly investigating ways of harnessing this burgeoning market of interactive media. Plastic surgeons are apt to embrace innovation and emerging technologies, and they are now helping to define the interaction between social media and medicine. Social media is a powerful tool that needs to be used wisely to avoid pitfalls.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is an opportunity for people to connect electronically and informally. It is designed to make introductions, share experiences, build community, and overall link people with common interests.¹ Social media platforms represent a dynamic and powerful tool to educate, engage, market to, and directly communicate with patients and professional colleagues.² It can include chat rooms, blogs, networks, or

channels. In the very intimate world of plastic surgery, it offers an opportunity to interact and learn more in greater dimension than traditional media, yet social media still allows patients to remain anonymous, if they so choose.¹ Most forms of social media function as a freemium business model, whereby the use of basic services is free but certain promotional features come with a price tag.

There are several different kinds of social media (discussed below).

Networks

Social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, include services whereby personal or business accounts are created and "friends" or "followers" connect. Instagram and Snapchat are primarily used on mobile devices and consist mainly of photographs and video content. Other networks, such as LinkedIn, are for professional networking as a way to connect with business contacts.

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Forums

The original chat room forums such as AOL have been replaced by more sophisticated Web sites such as Reddit, which has many “subreddits” that unite individuals with similar, targeted interests and create a framework for discussion and promotion of interesting content.

Video Sharing

YouTube and Vimeo offer robust video sharing capability with potential to handle longer educational content and store it in a more permanent fashion. Instagram and Snapchat also offer video content sharing with shorter videos that are often only temporarily available to the user’s network.

Reviews

Historically, review sites were meant more for restaurants and movies, but now physicians have a lot to gain or lose based on their reviews. Sites such as Healthgrades offer little conversation between the patient and physician, and are primarily a 1-way exchange for patients to post about their experience. Other review sites such as RealSelf, Yelp, and Google allow for practices to at least respond to patient reviews, although in a limited capacity because of HIPAA regulations.

HOW WE USE IT

Several studies in the plastic surgery literature have sought to investigate how we currently use social media. The first study, in 2013, found that the reasons for using social media, namely Facebook, included the beliefs that incorporation of social media into medical practice is inevitable (56.7%), that they are an effective marketing tool (52.1%), and that they provide a forum for patient education (49%). Surgeons with a primarily esthetic surgery practice were more likely to use social media.²

Chang and colleagues³ found that plastic surgeons using Facebook are younger compared with nonusers. They also found that users and nonusers believe the greatest benefits of Facebook are increased practice exposure and low-cost advertising; however, seldom are objective outcomes tracked. Facebook users were therefore encouraged to monitor its direct effects on quantifiable outcomes, such as professional Web site traffic, number of new patient referrals, conversion-to-surgery rates, and operative volume, to clarify whether or not its continued use is worth the effort.

AUTHORS’ IMPRESSIONS OF MAJOR PLATFORMS AS THEY APPLY TO FACIAL PLASTIC SURGERY

Facebook’s demographic tends to encompass adults from their mid to late 20s through to senior citizens. This platform also allows for multiple pictures per post, videos over an hour long, and detailed text descriptions. For these reasons, education-heavy, explanatory posts, or posts about surgical and nonsurgical antiaging interventions, may be fit more naturally on Facebook than other current platforms.

Snapchat, in contrast, is the most spontaneous, least formal of all current platforms, with a core demographic ranging from preteens to late 30s. Owing to the design of the application, users can predominately only post sequential video clips in a sequential, minimally processed manner. It is really not practical to post significant text, curated photos, or heavily produced video. Most Snapchat “stories” sunset automatically in 24 hours, and may not be viewed on the poster’s account after that point. Most adults have heard at least this 1 fact of Snapchat, and are often more willing to share their surgical footage or results on that platform for that reason.

Video clips are generally posted from a first-person point of view, in real time. Snapchat stories feel authentic because they are minimally produced. Snapchat’s primary value, then, over other platforms, is its ability to give the viewers a feeling of knowing the poster more personally. It is not uncommon for Snapchat followers to “feel like they already know” their surgeon before they have ever met.

Instagram’s demographic, similarly, runs from preteens through late 30s. Being an inherently visual platform, Instagram lends itself very well to a profile full of carefully curated before and after photos, each with a relatively small amount of descriptive text. Short video segments of 59 seconds or less may also be posted. Hashtag indexing of posts tends to be more important on Instagram, as many users search for and follow not just individual accounts, but new posts on hashtag subjects of interest.

Instagram’s recently introduced “stories” feature is essentially a Snapchat clone, and carries similar strength and limitations as described above. Well-managed Instagram accounts can leverage interplay between their enduring Instagram posts and ephemeral stories to further influence their followers. With the introduction of Instagram stories, speculation has grown that Snapchat will continue to lose relevance to Instagram.

YouTube is designed and built for video sharing, with no still photos and minimal caption text. YouTube videos may range from seconds to hours, and may be streamed in several formats, from smartphone-compatible to ultra-high resolution. Videos can also be tagged with keywords to ensure they are served automatically to viewers with matching interests. Because of these strengths, YouTube is the best platform for hosting and sharing detailed videos with semiprofessional or even professional production values (**Table 1**)

WHAT PATIENTS WANT

Asking patients about their favorite networks and their preferred type of content may help improve a plastic surgeon's success in building a practice through social media. In 2017, Sorice and colleagues⁴ found that Facebook and Instagram were the only 2 networks used several times a day by over 10% of patients surveyed. Despite the importance of social media, patients stated that the practice Web site was the most important online platform that influenced their decision to choose the practice. When asked about which Web site content was most important to patients, the leading factor was before and after photographs followed by information about procedures.

IS IT WORTH IT?

A recent publication from 2018 by Gould and Nazarian,⁵ adopted a business model called the 3-M framework for understanding social media and customer dialogue originally developed for Starbucks, and applied it to plastic surgery. In it, the elements include the megaphone (surgeon to patient), magnet (patient to surgeon), and monitor (patient to patient and surgeon to surgeon). They found a consistent trend of growth associated with all social media sources over time, contrasted with the flat or downtrending return on investment with a practice Web site, Google, and Yelp. Importantly, word of mouth was seen as having the largest potential for

growth, and reinvesting in the existing patient base was emphasized. The authors concluded that social media and branding campaigns for start-up practices, using Instagram and direct to consumer marketing, followed by Yelp, Real-Self, Facebook, and Google SEO for maintenance of the early practice, and then strategic investment in the patient base once established to bootstrap and leverage the word of mouth referrals.

#HASHTAG

Twitter and Instagram encourages the use of hashtags to make content more discoverable. Using the hashtag as a method to better curate content online may allow lay audiences to better identify quality information. Members of the Urology, Radiology, Oncology, and Gastroenterology specialties have devised hashtag ontologies that seek to unify all hashtags and organize discussion on specific medical topics. Hashtags may help drive dialogue among informed individuals and groups while filtering out "noise" posted by individuals not purposefully intending to join the scientific and clinical discussion.⁶ Facial plastic surgeons should seek a more active role in organizing social media dialogue by devising a hashtag ontology. Although patients may use certain lay terms, surgeons have the potential to organize information in more accurate and consistent terms that set apart the specialists from those pretending to be specialists.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Time Investment

Today's practice environment puts many demands on our time. We should continue to assess the value of social media, especially given its ability to consume a significant percentage of our time and effort. The larger our social media accounts become, the more demanding our followers are for fresh and frequent content.

Table 1
Select social media platforms with highlights of their demographics, format, and advantages

Platform	Facebook	Snapchat	Instagram	YouTube
Demographics	Mid 20s and up	Preteen-30s	Preteen-30s	Teens and up
Format	Photo; video	Video	Photo; video	Video
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Antiaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Videos sunset in 24 h • Real-time authenticity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curated content • Hashtag indexing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed videos • High-resolution streaming

Ethical and Legal Concerns

To maintain the respect of medical peers and the public, it is critical for facial plastic surgeons to use social media to provide factual information regarding surgery while protecting patient identity and professionally caring for the patient population.⁷

It is important to remember that data placed on the internet may not be easy to remove if and when a patient chooses to no longer be featured on our social media feeds.

Unwanted Solicitations from Advertisers

Advertisers often promise practices, especially on Instagram, swarms of new followers and promotion with little or no evidence or description that their service will be effective or legal. Increasing a follower base by hiring companies that use bots to artificially inflate your numbers is a recipe for getting removed from the network, or eventually seeing a drastic decline in followers after the bots are removed by the network. The best and most authentic way to grow a following is to post consistently relevant and informative material that potential patients find useful and relatable.

Negative Comments

Creating and maintaining a presence on social media has the potential to expose a practice to negative comments, either on review sites or media-sharing sites. These comments can be damaging as they are perpetually visible to potential patients, and often surgeons have no recourse due to privacy matters.

Unrealistic Expectations

Although patients may become more informed in some aspects through various posted photos and videos, they may also develop unrealistic and potentially dangerous overall expectations. Patients may come to expect a certain result after seeing it online without realizing that their particular situation may be unique and might alter the end result.

Experts Versus Amateurs

Competition between social media accounts occurs on an uneven playing field. For instance, ethical, expert providers will take care to standardize before and after photo lighting and positioning, and truthfully depict the time, cost, and risk involved in recovery. Amateur providers, however, may not realize that a “before” photo with heavy shadows and overhead lighting, paired with an “after” photo with strong front flash or

softbox light effect, is misleading and shows a greater improvement than matched photos would. These misleading “improvements” created by lighting, head position, or makeup may not be intentional, but the public can be misled into thinking the results are real.

Education and Experience Versus Follower Count

In the past, consumers used board certification, years in practice, and in-person word of mouth as proxies for a practice’s standing or reputability. In the current social media era, for better or worse, follower counts and online celebrity are replacing those other measures.

Personal Versus Professional

As facial plastic surgeons begin to expose their practices to the community at large using modern social media tools, often aspects of their personal life will bleed into their professional life. To what degree are we jeopardizing our families and loved ones or blurring the distinction between doctor and friend to our patients. These are issues we must all grapple with in our social media era.

SUMMARY

Social media are quickly becoming one of the main avenues for direct to consumer marketing. Patients use social media to find surgeons and to communicate about procedures, outcomes, and their experiences. A surgeon’s social media presence can dramatically increase their perception of being an expert and showcase to patients their style and approach. There is no single best social network, instead various networks exist with unique characteristics that each have the potential to drive traffic to a practice. Social media can be potentially hazardous for patients and surgeons if misused.

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