

Reaching out

While most dentists engage directly with patients in the chair, a few embrace blogging as a way to spread the good word on oral health. By **Kerryn Ramsey**

"A website is like a window into your practice. If you're knocking on a window and there's nobody there and everything is dark, you may not want to go in. But if there are bright lights inside with movement and action, you'll want to go in. And that bright window is the blog."

The apt parable is by Dr Tijana Fisher, an inner-city Sydney practitioner during the day, and an online blogger at night. For the past two years, she's been writing fortnightly blog posts that appear on both her practice site and the website of a national consumer magazine. But rather than just run-of-the-mill topics, such as whitening toothpaste and tooth decay, she broaches subjects such as eating disorders and marijuana. "Who wants to read another boring scientific article?," says Dr Fisher who's run The Dentist at 70 Pitt Street for the past six years. "You can't get too deep. It has to be light as it's for the general public."

To encourage traffic, she's become a knowledgeable dental confidante; she reveals personal anecdotes about her family, debunks myths about dentistry, and even reveals her own long-time dental dilemma—is it okay to get braces when you're an adult? Empathy and humour also come into play, as seen in a recent post: "Over the past few years, I felt like a bit of a fraud, recommending orthodontic treatment to clients and having less than ideal teeth arrangement—like a hairdresser with bad hair!"

A dedicated blogger for the past two years, Dr Fisher has found that her casual rapport goes down a treat with online viewers. Patients "want to come and see you because they believe the same things. And they trust you'll look after them," she says.

Before long, she was signed up by national *WellBeing* magazine to produce fortnightly dental blog posts, and she also posts regular updates on Facebook and Twitter. She spends about four or five hours a week to write the copy, but it was pure determination that got her to this point. Her native language is Serbian, and it wasn't until age 16 that she arrived in New Zealand. "As a new immigrant child, I was very self-conscious about my English. I remember writing my first English assignment and the teacher thought the essay was stupid."

But by the time she started at university, she could understand and simplify even the most convoluted dental reports. "A lot of scientific writers will write things that are incomprehensible," she says. "Even some scientists can't understand what they are trying to say." Dr Fisher's online articles are so well written, even *WellBeing* magazine doesn't edit her copy.

Despite a penchant for waxing lyrical, Dr Fisher sees blog posts as a powerful business tool. "You are educating your prospects and turning them into clients. It's a long slow process but it's a lot more cost-effective than advertising on any other media. Since it's ongoing, there's a bit of a relationship and people might follow your blog for a while before they decide they need a dentist."

Dr Fisher has seen how the democratisation of the internet has made information accessible to the public. But as an

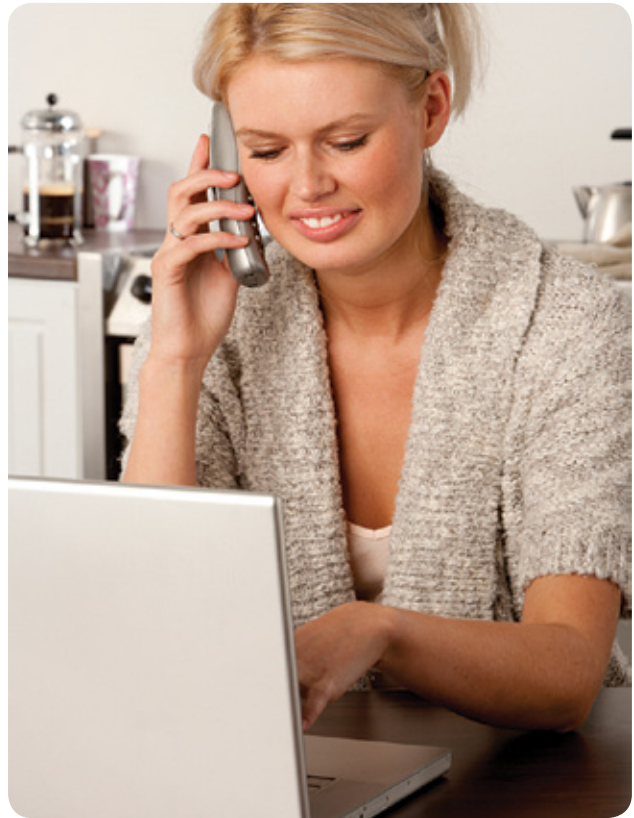


Dr Tijana Fisher, dentist and blogger, sees blogging as a powerful educational and business tool.

Traffic time

Sonja Bertrand of Cloud Public Relations explains how to set up a blog and increase the traffic...

- Before publishing any blog post, it's important to conduct keyword research. Google's Keyword Tool will tell you how many people are searching for your particular keywords each month, and will also suggest related keywords that are being sought after. By strategically placing these keywords into your blog post, you will ensure the post will show up in Google, providing you with extremely targeted website traffic. Make sure you're not just dumping your keywords into the blog post though—you still want it to be an enjoyable read (and Google will penalise you for this!).
- Make sure you're adding images to your blog posts. Not only does it make it more enjoyable to read, but search engines also love them. Don't forget to add 'alt tags' though. Because search engines can't read your images, they need special tags to understand what the images are. So, if you're posting a diagram with your root-canal post, make sure you add an alt tag that says 'root canal diagram'.
- If you have a blog, make sure you update it at least monthly. This will also alert the search engines to new content, which means your website will be ranked higher in search result.
- After writing your first few blog posts, it can be hard to think of topics. But they're out there! During your normal day in your practice, pay specific attention to any questions or interests. Be more aware of the things you tell patients during their visit. Chances are, this would be great content to publish on your blog.
- Avoid duplicating content that you've found somewhere else. Not only is this really poor practice, search engines will pick up on it and will penalise your website by not ranking it in search results. If you are using bits of content from other websites, make sure your blog post has at least 30 per cent unique content.
- Working with a copywriter or social media expert is a great way to have your blog updated regularly, but ensure that you're working with someone who specialises in blogging and is aware of the latest online marketing tactics. □



There's a few rules for dealing with how you blog that will make it more rewarding as an experience.

outcome, anyone can write about dentistry. "On a lot of blogs, it's naturopaths or other people writing about dental issues. That's fine—that's their perspective—but we, as professionals, do have to put our opinions and what we know out there so that people get a more balanced view."

Another dentist dedicated to the craft of blogging is Brisbane-based practitioner Dr Ben Thai who runs Underwood Dental Care. He first discovered the growth of blogging when scouring food blogs and forums. It inspired him to launch a regular blog on the practice website. He's found that it keeps the practice's name and branding in people's minds.

"Initially it was quite regular," he recalls, "but as the business has been building up, it has been difficult to update. But as I have a monthly newsletter sent out to existing patients, I ensure that the blog is updated at least monthly."

His goal is to "provide useful information in a short and to-the-point way", but occasionally, finding fresh and innovative topics can be more difficult than expected.

Dr Thai sees the Australian Dental Association as a good stimulus for material, particularly when it comes to public health promotions, such as the Mouthguard Awareness Month. He also takes topics that have been raised from patients. "Lately I've been talking a bit about orthodontics—particularly braces—as I have been taking a lot of courses to broaden my own field of knowledge," he says. Dr Tijana, meanwhile, also draws inspiration from news reports and professional journals.

According to Sonja Bertrand, director of Sydney social media marketing agency Cloud Public Relations, blogs are a useful online marketing tool for dentists. "Not only does writ-

ing a regular blog ensure your website will show up in Google search results for important keywords like 'dental practice Sydney', but it's also a great way to highlight your expertise and provide useful information to potential patients," she explains. For instance, a patient needing a root canal treatment is likely to turn to Google as the first source of information. "If you've written a blog post on 'When you need a root canal and what to expect during your visit', chances are they'll call you for more information and/or to book in the treatment," says Bertrand.

A little bit of controversy also improves Google ranking, as Dr Fisher discovered a few months ago. Her post was so contentious, her husband came home to tell her, "Guess what? You're now the most controversial blogger in the dental world."

The hot topic was how prolonged cannabis use affects oral health. Dr Fisher touched on the side effects of the drug—dry mouth, oral cancer, gum disease, fungal overgrowth and mental health issues.

"There was a massive abusive response," she recalls. "What I found interesting is that I was pointing out side effects that are only to do with dentistry but people felt that I was exaggerating. But to me, I can't exaggerate it enough. That's my profession, that's what I do, that's what means a lot to me. And dry mouth is a huge issue—saliva contains a whole lot of things that protect you from gum disease, cancer and tooth decay, and it helps you lubricate your mouth when you are speaking.

"I got into a very heated discussion with these people [online] but I liked it. Next I am going to write about oral sex or something like that because it's so good to get the feedback!"

Quote

Dr Ben Thai

"Lately I've been talking a bit about orthodontics—particularly braces—as I have been taking a lot of courses to broaden my own field of knowledge."

Sonja Bertrand notes that a blog is a great opportunity to show your personal side and take away some of the fears patients may have about coming into your practice. Dr Thai found that when he goes online, he writes as if "I am speaking to you in person. I often use layman's language to convey my technical explanations."

For dentists, time is of the essence, so is it worth regularly posting factual, fascinating blogs? Dr Thai has an affirmative reply. "Many patients have come in as a result of the information they have read." Dr Fisher, however, says it's worth looking at your location before taking part. For country practitioners, word-of-mouth and community involvement is all that's needed to get new patients on the books. City dentists, though, need to get the word out in a different way, such as social media. Dr Fisher says that most of her clients come from internet searches, and the blogs provide a sense of currency. □



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