

# From Trends to Trust: Harnessing Social Media for the Future of Dentistry

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## Introduction: The Digital Shift in Dentistry

Dentistry has entered a new era where patient engagement, professional growth, and clinical trends are shaped as much by algorithms as by evidence-based practices. Social media platforms, once the domain of casual networking, have become dynamic spaces that connect dental professionals, educate patients, and can spark global conversations about oral health. For dentists, this digital shift offers unprecedented opportunities but is loaded with complex challenges.

Imagine a young professional scrolling through Instagram, captivated by a polished video showcasing a smile transformation, or a patient whose treatment expectations are influenced by a TikTok trend promoting veneers as the ultimate solution. These scenarios are no longer hypothetical; they reflect the lived realities of a profession navigating the powerful pull of social media. Yet, with opportunity comes responsibility. The same platforms that democratize knowledge and expand visibility can distort patient perceptions, fuel unrealistic expectations, and blur the line between healthcare and commercialization. We need to explore the intricate interplay between social media and the dental profession, its potential to elevate the field, the pitfalls it presents, and the ethical considerations it demands. The central question arises: How can practitioners leverage this digital tool responsibly to enhance patient care, professional development, and the integrity of the profession itself?

## Enhancing Professional Networking and Education

In an era where borders are no longer barriers, social media has become a vital tool for connecting dental professionals worldwide. Platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, X, and Facebook have evolved into digital hubs where dentists share cases, discuss challenges, and celebrate successes. The result? A global community of professionals fostering collaboration, innovation, and continuous learning.

For dentists these benefits are profound. A practitioner in South Africa can engage with peers in Europe or Asia, exchanging insights about complex cases or the latest technologies. Social media groups dedicated to dental education host live discussions, offer clinical tips, and provide access to virtual conferences, all with the swipe of a finger. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok host a wealth of instructional videos, from mastering advanced endodontic techniques to refining cosmetic procedures, making continuing education more accessible than ever.

But it is not just about access — it is about engagement. Dentists who actively participate in these digital communities gain more than knowledge: they gain visibility. Sharing successful cases or innovative approaches can elevate a practitioner's reputation, opening doors to collaborations, referrals, and even mentorship opportunities.



However, digital networking comes with its own set of challenges. The unfiltered nature of social media means that not all shared information is accurate or evidence-based. Practitioners must critically evaluate what they consume online, ensuring that the tips and techniques they adopt align with best practices and especially with evidence-based scientific standards. Furthermore, while showcasing clinical work can build credibility, it must be done ethically, respecting patient confidentiality and ensuring transparency about results.

Social media's role in professional networking and education is undeniable, but its true power lies in how dentists choose to engage. By participating thoughtfully and ethically, practitioners can turn these platforms into catalysts for personal and professional growth.

### Patient Engagement and Practice Growth

Social media has transformed how dental professionals interact with their patients, opening a direct line of communication that was once unimaginable. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok serve as virtual storefronts where dentists can showcase their work, educate their audience, and build trust, all before a patient even steps into the clinic. This newfound engagement is reshaping patient expectations and the way dental practices grow.

#### *Educating Patients Beyond the Chair*

Social media offers a unique opportunity to educate patients in a format that is accessible, engaging, and visually compelling. A well-crafted post or video can explain complex procedures like root canals, emphasize the importance of preventive care, or debunk myths about treatments. For example, a short TikTok video demonstrating proper flossing techniques might reach thousands, if not millions, of viewers, far more than traditional in-office consultations could. By providing credible, bite-sized information, dentists position themselves as trusted sources of oral health knowledge, empowering patients to make informed decisions about their care.

#### *Showcasing Expertise and Building Practice Visibility*

For practices, social media acts as a powerful marketing tool. Posting before-and-after photos, sharing patient testimonials, or showcasing advanced procedures builds credibility and attracts potential patients. Creative and consistent engagement can amplify a practice's visibility, especially in competitive markets. For instance, a South African dentist focussing in smile makeovers can use Instagram to reach a local audience interested in cosmetic dentistry, distinguishing themselves from competitors.

#### *The Risks of Over-Commercialization*

The push for visibility and growth can come at a cost. The over-commercialization of dentistry on social media has led to concerns about shifting perceptions of the profession. When platforms focus heavily on aesthetics (highlighting veneers, whitening, or other high-margin procedures), they risk framing dentistry as a luxury service rather than essential healthcare. This trend can create unrealistic expectations for patients, who may prioritize cosmetic outcomes over functional health. Furthermore, there is the ethical challenge of ensuring that shared content reflects reality. Misleading photos, exaggerated claims, or omitting potential risks can erode trust. A polished social media presence may bring patients through the door, but if expectations are unmet, it could damage a practitioner's reputation.

#### *Striking the Right Balance*

The key to effective patient engagement lies in balance. Social media should complement, not replace, the clinical experience. Dentists must remain educators and advocates first, using these platforms to build relationships rooted in trust and transparency. By focusing on education and ethical marketing, practitioners can leverage social media to not only grow their practices but also enhance the public's understanding of oral health.

### The Influence of Social Media Trends on Patient Expectations

From viral smile makeovers to "ToothTok" trends, social media has become a driving force in shaping patient perceptions and expectations of dental care. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are filled with influencers showcasing their dazzling transformations, often highlighting treatments such as veneers, teeth whitening, and aligners. While these trends can inspire patients to prioritize their oral health, they also create a double-edged sword for dental professionals: an influx of interest, but often accompanied by misconceptions and unrealistic expectations.

#### *The Power of Trends in Cosmetic Dentistry*

Social media trends have brought cosmetic dentistry into the spotlight, turning procedures like composite bonding, whitening, and orthodontic aligners into sought-after treatments. For dentists, this presents an opportunity to expand their patient base and increase the uptake of elective procedures. However, the downside is that these trends often reduce complex treatments to simplified, glamorized outcomes. Patients may come in requesting "Hollywood smiles" without understanding the long-term implications, costs, or limitations of such procedures.

For example, the viral promotion of instant veneers as a quick-fix solution rarely addresses the need for proper diagnosis, preparation, or maintenance. Patients influenced by these trends may overlook the importance of preserving natural tooth structure or the potential risks of over-treatment. It falls to dental professionals to navigate these conversations delicately, balancing patient desires with evidence-based care.

#### *Challenges in Correcting Misconceptions*

One of the most significant challenges dentists face is managing patient expectations shaped by social media. A patient who has seen a dramatic transformation on Instagram may expect similar results, even if their clinical case or budget does not align. Furthermore, "DIY dentistry" tutorials that promote unsafe practices like at-home composite bonding or mail-order aligners pose a direct risk to patient health.

Dentists must step into the role of educators and advocates, guiding patients away from misinformation and toward treatments that prioritize their oral and systemic health. Addressing these misconceptions requires patience, clear communication, and a strong emphasis on ethical practice.

#### *The Dentist's Role in Guiding Trends Responsibly*

While social media trends can complicate patient interactions, they also offer a powerful platform for dentists to lead the conversation. By sharing accurate information, dispelling myths, and showcasing real-world outcomes, practitioners can influence trends in a positive direction. For instance, posts that emphasize the importance of maintaining natural

teeth, highlight the value of preventive care, or showcase minimally invasive procedures can counterbalance the allure of quick-fix solutions.

Moreover, dentists can advocate for treatments that align with patient health and well-being rather than with purely aesthetic goals. A focus on education can help patients understand that while social media trends may inspire their interest, their treatment should be guided by individual needs and long-term outcomes.

#### *Striking a Balance Between Trend and Truth*

Social media trends will continue to shape patient expectations, but it is up to the profession to harness their power responsibly. By engaging thoughtfully with these trends, dentists can not only attract new patients but also elevate the standard of care. Social media, when used wisely, can bridge the gap between aspiration and education, ensuring patients make informed decisions that reflect both their desires and their best interests.

#### **Ethical and Legal Considerations**

As the role of social media grows in dentistry, so too does the importance of ethical and legal responsibility. While platforms like Instagram and TikTok offer unprecedented opportunities to engage with patients and promote services, they also present significant challenges. Navigating these digital spaces requires a careful balance between innovation, professionalism, and compliance with regulatory frameworks.

#### *Maintaining Patient Confidentiality*

One of the most critical ethical challenges in social media use is safeguarding patient confidentiality. Sharing clinical cases or testimonials can enhance credibility and attract patients, but even subtle oversights such as including identifiable features in photos can breach confidentiality. Dentists must ensure that all shared content complies with the POPI act, with privacy regulations and that explicit, documented informed consent from patients is obtained. Failure to do so not only risks legal repercussions but also undermines patient trust.

#### *Avoiding Misinformation and Misleading Content*

The pressure to create engaging content can lead some practitioners to oversimplify, exaggerate, or misrepresent outcomes. Photos edited for perfection, videos showcasing extreme cases without context, or promises of “pain-free” results for every procedure can all set unrealistic expectations, and is blatantly dishonest. Such practices not only misinform the public but also damage the credibility of the profession. Ethical content creation demands transparency and honesty. Sharing the challenges, risks, and realistic outcomes of treatments fosters trust and positions the dentist as a credible source of information. The goal is to educate and empower patients, not to mislead or manipulate them for commercial and financial gain.

#### *Professionalism in the Public Sphere*

Social media blurs the line between personal and professional personas, making it essential for dentists to always maintain professionalism. Inappropriate comments, casual language, or controversial posts can harm a practitioner’s reputation and diminish the respect associated with the profession. Regulatory bodies in many countries, including South Africa, have issued guidelines on maintaining professionalism in digital spaces, underscoring its importance.

#### *Legal Implications and Regulatory Compliance*

In addition to ethical concerns, dentists must adhere to legal requirements governing social media use. These include ensuring that advertising complies with truth-in-advertising laws, avoiding unsubstantiated claims, and adhering to health department regulations. Social media is not a free-for-all; it is a public space where practitioners are held accountable for the content they share.

#### **A Framework for Responsible Engagement:**

Navigating these ethical and legal challenges requires a clear framework for social media use:

- **Informed Consent:** Always obtain written patient consent for any content featuring their cases.



- **Transparency:** Provide clear, accurate, and evidence-based information in all posts.
- **Professional Boundaries:** Maintain a tone and demeanor that reflects the dignity of the profession. A post can be both professional and fun, but a balance is necessary.
- **Compliance:** Stay informed about relevant laws and regulations governing social media use in dentistry, and of current, evidenced-based best-practice.

Social media offers immense potential for dentistry, but it is a tool that must be wielded with care. By adhering to ethical principles and regulatory standards, dentists can build a digital presence that enhances their reputation, educates the public, and strengthens the profession.

### Social Media as a Catalyst for Trends and Innovation

Social media is not just a platform for connection; it is a powerful engine driving trends and innovation in dentistry. With its unparalleled reach and immediacy, social media has accelerated the adoption of new techniques, technologies, and patient-centered approaches. However, with this influence comes a responsibility for dental professionals to critically assess these trends and innovations to ensure they align with evidence-based practices and ethical standards.

#### *Accelerating the Spread of Innovations*

Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have brought cutting-edge advancements in dentistry to the forefront. From 3D-printed prosthetics to minimally invasive techniques, social media has allowed practitioners to showcase their use of new tools and materials in real time. This visibility inspires other dentists to explore these innovations, creating a ripple effect across the profession. For example, the promotion of digital workflows such as intraoral scanners, CAD/CAM systems, and 3D printing has been widely shared on social media, illustrating their potential to improve precision, reduce chairside time, and enhance patient satisfaction. Social media has also been instrumental in popularizing aesthetic procedures like composite bonding and aligners, making them more accessible and mainstream.

#### *Bridging the Gap Between Patients and Technology*

Social media has not only made dental innovations more visible to professionals but also to patients. As patients see trends like smile makeovers or laser dentistry on their feeds, they become more informed, and sometimes more demanding, about their treatment options. This can lead to increased interest in high-tech solutions but also raises the stakes for dentists to deliver on heightened expectations. Be ready to implement conflict management skills in your practice!

While this patient interest can drive adoption, it is essential for dentists to educate patients about the practicalities, costs, and suitability of these technologies for their individual needs. A laser system may not be the answer for every patient, and the hype surrounding certain trends must be tempered with realistic advice and evidence-based decision-making.

#### *Balancing Innovation with Evidence*

The challenge lies in separating genuine advancements from fleeting fads. Not every trend circulating on social media is supported by robust clinical evidence, and dentists must navigate this landscape with a critical eye. For instance, the “no-prep veneers” trend has gained traction online, but its suitability depends on the patient's unique dental anatomy and oral health, which cannot be evaluated through a video or photo alone.

To embrace innovation responsibly, dentists must rely on peer-reviewed research, professional training, and clinical guidelines. Social media can be an incredible source of inspiration, but it is not a substitute for rigorous evaluation.

#### *A Call for Thoughtful Adoption*

As catalysts for change, dental professionals have the unique opportunity to shape the narrative surrounding trends and innovations. By sharing real-world outcomes, emphasizing patient safety, and promoting evidence-based practices, dentists can leverage social media to advance the profession while maintaining its integrity.

### Harnessing the Power of Social Media in Dentistry

Social media has undeniably become an important component of modern dentistry, reshaping the profession in ways we could hardly have imagined a decade ago. It connects practitioners across the globe, fosters patient engagement, amplifies innovations, and brings dental care into the public consciousness like never before. Yet, with this immense potential comes the responsibility to navigate its complexities with care, professionalism, and integrity.

For general dentists, the challenge lies in striking the right balance. Social media must be more than a tool for self-promotion; it should be a platform to educate, inspire, and uphold the highest standards of patient care. By engaging thoughtfully and ethically, dentists can use social media to bridge the gap between aspiration and reality, ensuring that trends are grounded in evidence and that patient expectations align with achievable, beneficial outcomes.

As a profession, we are uniquely positioned to shape the narrative surrounding oral health on social media. Whether it's by countering misinformation, showcasing innovations responsibly, or advocating for preventive care, dentists have the power to lead the conversation in a way that enhances public trust and strengthens the profession's reputation.

The digital landscape offers endless opportunities, but it is only as effective as the intent behind its use. By embracing social media with a patient-first mindset, we can transform it from a mere tool of engagement into a force for positive change, creating a future where dentistry thrives not only in clinics but also in the global, digital community.