



Kristie Nation

The power of the #hashtag: Will it work for your practice?

AS AN ENGAGED MEMBER of today's digital and "social society," you probably already know what a hashtag is. Hashtags are everywhere, bringing diverse audiences together over common interests ranging from brand names (#Nike) and popular television series (Netflix's #OITNB) to marketing campaigns (Subway's #JanuANY) and more. Hashtags provide a quick, recognizable way to bring diverse audiences together over a common interest.

As a dental practice on social media, it might be tricky to find ways to connect to patients. Learning how to leverage the most popular tools out there can help you connect with your audience. According to analysis of the Interbrand 100 list, 97% of the world's top 100 brands used hashtags on Twitter last year.¹

So how do you make hashtags relatable to your practice? There are three things you'll want to do to get started.

KRISTIE NATION

is the founder and CEO of myDentalCMO, a marketing consulting firm that provides strategic marketing "treatment plans" exclusively for dental practices. The firm was founded with a mission to prevent dentists from wasting countless dollars marketing their practices ineffectively. She can be reached at mydentalcmo@gmail.com or (877) 746-4410.

1. RESEARCH

Start by using tools such as HashAtIt to search for hashtags that are related to your practice and that are already being used on social media.

Use Twitter's own search feature to find Tweets hashtagged #dentist or #dentistry in your geographic area to find out what people are saying about you and your competition.

You can also pay attention to trending hashtags, as you might be able to piggyback on them to relate to your audience; for example, you can link to a healthy pie recipe during the ever-popular holiday season revival of #pumpkineverything.

2. BRAINSTORM

Look for ways to creatively talk about your practice's brand using hashtags. According to the social media gurus at HootSuite, your primary tag shouldn't necessarily be your practice name but a phrase specific to your practice.² Think #FunDentistry for a pediatric practice or #NoMoreDentures if you specialize in dental implants.

3. TEST AND RETEST

Throw stuff at the wall on Twitter and see what sticks. You probably won't hit on the perfect hashtag right away, but according to Buddy Media, even one lonely hashtag can

increase interaction by 100%.⁴ (Just don't use more than two per Tweet—which can drop your interaction back down by 17%.³) Keep generating ideas and trying new things until you hit a campaign that picks up traction.

Of course, there are a few don'ts to add under all of the dos when it comes to hashtags. Aside from overdoing hashtags, you'll also want to avoid:

- **Using a hashtag that could be turned against you.** The McDonald's hashtag #McDStories backfired when Twitter users used it to slam the fast-food giant for its artery-clogging food.⁴ Similarly, the hashtag #DentalStories could lead patients to share less-than-positive experiences, promoting fear of dentistry, which is absolutely not your goal. Instead, think along the lines of #LoveMyDentist, which would steer online conversation in the direction of positive feedback.
- **Dipping your toe in political topics.** If you must participate in controversial conversations online, use a personal account that in no way links back to your practice's account.
- **Limiting your hashtag usage to Twitter.** Instagram is just as hashtag-friendly as Twitter, and even Facebook is getting in the game. Implement hashtags across your accounts and be consistent across all platforms.
- **Being fake.** Amy Howell of Howell Marketing Strategies identifies "being real (not automated)," providing value, and engaging with others as vital strategies to the social media outreach process.⁵
- **Making it too complicated.** A hashtag that is complex or too long won't be picked up by users if there is an easier alternative. The producers of the American version of X-Factor learned that the hard way when they made #XFUSA the official hashtag of their show to set it apart from the British version, but fans stubbornly stuck with #xfactor at a rate of five to one.⁶
- **Violating HIPAA.** It's exciting to interact with patients outside of the office, but be careful not to initiate a tweet that names a patient. If a patient tweets to thank you for a great visit, it's certainly OK to retweet and/or respond—but don't forget about privacy and be respectful.⁷

You can and should leverage the power of the hashtag for your practice. Just be smart about it. Twitter, like any other social tool, is as helpful to you as you let it be, so start exploring the possibilities! **DE**

REFERENCES

1. Bar-Joseph U. 5 brilliant ways to use #hashtags in social media marketing. Search Engine Watch. <http://searchenginewatch.com/sew/how-to/2327748/5-brilliant-ways-to-use-hashtags-in-social-media-marketing>. Published February 10, 2014.
2. LePage E. The do's and don'ts of how to use hashtags. Hootsuite. <http://blog.hootsuite.com/how-to-use-hashtags/>. Published August 2014.
3. Lee K. A scientific guide to hashtags: How many, which ones, and where to use them. BufferSocial. <https://blog.bufferapp.com/a-scientific-guide-to-hashtags-which-ones-work-when-and-how-many>. Published July 7, 2015.
4. Thompson D. 4 secrets for picking effective hashtags. Business 2 Community. <http://www.business2community.com/social-media/4-secrets-picking-effective-hashtags-0680543>. Published November 13, 2013.
5. Lee A. 31 experts give their best small business tips for standing out on social media. Post Planner. <http://www.postplanner.com/small-business-tips-for-standing-out-on-social-media/>.
6. Social media for small businesses: How to harness the hashtag (infographic). Huffington Post. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/12/small-business-hashtag_n_3991246.html. Published November 12, 2013.
7. Shelley P. Three ways dentists can use Twitter, and four ways they shouldn't. Elm Endodontics. <http://www.elmendo.com/2012/03/three-ways-dentists-can-use-twitter-and-four-ways-they-shouldnt/>. Published March 12, 2012.