It is an undisputed fact that in the world of dentistry, no amount of expensive advertising or fancy marketing can beat the power of word-of-mouth referrals from your satisfied patients. What your patients say about you is the ultimate driver of your business success. Today, consumers just turn to the Internet to locate and select a dental practice. Understanding this and using the right tools will help you create and maintain the most relevant, valuable practice builder you’ll ever have: the experience and feedback of your own patients shared with millions of prospective patients actively seeking a new dental practice. It’s up to you to choose: will your online reputation consist of a single thread of random gossip, or will it become your most valued asset, carefully managed and nurtured to give you the best return on your investment?

Everyone knows consumers will share a good experience with a few people, but they’ll make a point of telling the world about a negative one. As a service provider, you and your staff are your customers’ web designers. You don’t sell widgets; you sell your skills, experience, specialties, personalities, hours and location—and your very existence and livelihood depend on your reputation.

We all work hard to ensure our patients have a good experience and ask that refer us to friends and family based on this. Now, take that a step further, and expand it to hundreds, and thousands of prospective patients, and you’ve just moved from the world of offline word-of-mouth referrals to the sophisticated new world of online reputation-based marketing—or word-of-mouth 2.0.

We know that in the growing world of online reviews, consumers want and expect to find the local user information they seek, whether it’s a great Italian restaurant or top-notch cosmetic dental practice. As the Internet has come of age, the option for quality and services has exploded. The advent of local reviews provides a return to neighbourhood intimacy—and neighbourhood reputation.

However, even the world’s leading search engine recognises the extreme power and relevance of word-of-mouth feedback. Google recently expanded its offerings to enable consumers to search for and compare local businesses online. Try searching for a dentist in your area by typing in your postcode followed by the word “dentist” in the Google. You can see a map with a listing of relevant, valuable practice snapshots in time, but ten dental practices will be displayed above the natural search results.

To be fair right of each listing is a link to reviews. This is where a consumer can view what your patients say about your practice. With this Google has hit the referral jackpot: this functionality leverages consumer relationships and capitalises on the inherent credibility of the first-person testimonial. This is a priceless intangible—something advertising dollars just can’t buy.

Build your reputation

So how do you, as a dentist, take advantage of this new tool to guide and shape your online reputation? It is important to remember that this is not a practice snapshot in time, but rather a reputation that is formed and sustained over time. Your best chance of securing and maintaining a ‘top ten’ placement is to be amongst the first to populate your Google profile—and to keep a steady stream of relevant reviews and quality practice information flowing into Google. You can do this in one of two ways: passively or actively.

The passive approach: you can hope the patients who visit your practice have the wherewithal to create a Google account, find your Google profile, and submit a review. This requires time and effort on your part, and staff time to inform patients and promote the process. Even if your staff are dedicated to making your patients aware of the online review process, you can only hope patients remember to follow through once they get back to their busy schedules at home and work. The story of a passive approach will result in one or two reviews posted over the course of several months.

The proactive approach: today, the only integrated approach to proactively managing your online reputation on Google is through companies such as Demandforce (http://demandforce.com/), an online patient-communication company. They recently announced a data integration agreement with Google that enables dental practices to populate their Google profiles easily, including posting reviews directly from data originating from their communication systems.

With Demandforce, each patient is automatically sent a thank-you e-mail message after each appointment. As part of the thank-you, they can choose to submit a confidential survey of their visit, as well as a public review. You can read the reviews of your practice and post a response or ask for a review to be removed if it does not meet standard posting requirements. After seven days, the data is automatically sent to Google to populate your profile.

Solicited or not, online reviews are here to stay. Your patients’ satisfaction and their resulting word-of-mouth referrals will always be our bread and butter; only the serving plate has changed. What are you doing to shape your online reputation? Have you googled your practice or your competitors lately?

“It is highly likely you already have an online reputation, and may not even know it”