



Geoff Cooling,
Author,
Just Audiology Stuff Blog

Correspondence
E: geoffreycooling@gmail.com
Web:
www.justaudiologystuff.com

Declaration of Competing Interests
None declared.

Social Media & Marketing For Audiological Practices

Geoff Cooling has worked in hearing health care for a number of years and in his spare time is author of the Just Audiology Stuff blog, which covers commercial strategies for health care and specifically hearing health care. Geoff has experience of working as a hearing health professional for a large national retailer, and now is employed by a large hearing aid manufacturer. An advocate of social media, Geoff offers his advice for using Web 2.0 for information provision, community engagement and marketing purposes.

Online marketing strategy - how & why

In this article I would like to lay out my arguments for engaging in non-traditional online marketing channels for audiological practices. I'll discuss the multiple channels available, the content type on each channel and the measurement of results. I realise that many of our profession believe that our demographics are not online. Hence any online marketing is a waste of time and money. I believe they are wrong, in fact I know they are. So let us explore social media and marketing together in relation to marketing for audiological practices.

The why?

We have moved into the age of disruptive technology, the truth of that statement is easy to see around us every day. Our attitudes and habits as a society are changing, particularly the channels of communication that we use. More and more, people are communicating through social web channels, and we build online communities that increase our social connections beyond family and friends, to friends of friends and even strangers. Perhaps the explosion of this type of engagement is rooted in a combination of our need to relate to our friends and family members who are removed from us by distance and also as a reaction to the lost sense of community that appears to prevail in our society.

The World Wide Web, whether it is used for searching or communication has become the go-to tool. Whilst initially this phenomenon was driven by tech people and the young, it has become accepted throughout society in every demographic. As I grew up, if I wanted to search for a business that provided a particular service I picked up the 'Yellow Pages'. This is an action that admittedly some of our patients do seem to do. However, I cannot remember the last time that I looked at the Yellow Pages and my children do not even know what it is!

I had an hilarious conversation a while ago with my seventeen year old son pertaining to the phonebook. After trying to explain the concept I settled on telling him it was Google before the dinosaurs died! There is nothing like children to make you feel old.

As we know, some of our demographic still use the Yellow Pages but they are few. More and more of our patients are turning to the web and the ubiquitous Google to supply their required information. Not only are they using search engines but many of them are using social networks to communicate and becoming involved in communities with shared interests. This fact is borne out by research results from around the world.

I present in Table 1, thanks to Pew Research Centre, the survey stats of internet users in the USA. I would like to point your attention to the age demographics results. Ninety-one percent of individuals between 30 and 49 are active on the Internet. These are the children of your prospective patients.

Seventy-seven percent of adults in the USA aged between 50 and 64 are online, and these people should be viewed as your long-term prospects. In fact, some of them are your prospective patients right now. Don't forget, our customers are getting younger due to better education and increased lifestyle expectations, so people are searching out treatment for their hearing loss earlier and earlier at a much younger age.

Fifty-three percent of USA 65 year olds and older use the Internet. These are your potential patients and indeed some of your existing ones. Who reading this would not like to be able to reach 53% of their possible target market?

Your motivation

Marketing to our demographic is not just about newspapers, magazines and direct mail anymore. Nor though is it just about online

Seventy-seven percent of adults aged between 50 and 64 are online, these people should be viewed as your long-term prospects

marketing channels. I have heard it said that traditional marketing is dead and has been replaced by online marketing but I don't think that is truly the case. However, I think that we as an industry have to become smarter and more adept at targeted marketing across all available channels.

I think that it should be a combined approach using the best media for your business both traditional and new. I also think that both of these channels should and can be mixed and combined across individual campaigns. I think that this synergy can increase your exposure and engagement and supply a constant flow of business to your practice. In effect, it can reduce the cost per lead over time allowing you to better cope with the pressure on margins that are to the forefront of everybody's mind at present. So where does social media fit in our industry's marketing mix?

The channels

First let us look at the most prominent online channels used right now. There are four main channels that are being used by other industries and indeed some members of our own industry. They are Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and blogs. So, how are these channels used to a commercial advantage? Each channel is different, the goals and usage profile tend to be quite different across the channels. However, before we do, I caution you, the single most important online channel for an audiological practice is their website. The use of social media channels is especially important to support and boost your website search ranking through keywords.

Facebook

The management of a Facebook page tends to be a mix of content curation, finding and posting links to information that you judge may be of interest to your target audience, and content manufacture — the manufacture of good content that you deem will be of interest to your audience and will show your professionalism and expertise. Facebook is also a place where you may build relationships with people. Facebook users actually tend to spend quite a bit of time on the site.

Twitter

Twitter is much more about content curation and some sharing of links to your own content. The following that you build up on Twitter will expect more engagement and will probably engage with you more.

A blog

A blog is where you and your business can shine. A blog is all about content

Table 1. Demographics of Internet Users in the USA.

	% who use the Internet
All adults	82
Men	83
Women	82
Race / ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic	84
Black, Non-Hispanic	77
Hispanic (English- and Spanish-speaking)	75
Age	
18-29	97
30-49	91
50-64	77
65+	53
Household income	
Less than \$30,000 / year	71
\$30,000-\$49,999	87
\$50,000-\$74,999	93
\$75,000+	97
Educational attainment	
No high school diploma	58
High school grad	75
Some College	90
College +	95

Above is the percentage of each group of American adults who use the Internet, according to our April 2012 survey. For instance, 82% of women use the Internet.

Sources: The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project's Spring Tracking Survey conducted March 15th - April 3rd, 2012. N = 2,254 adults age 18 and older, including 903 interviews conducted by cell phone. Interviews were conducted on both English and Spanish.

manufacture. It's where you supply content that shows your professionalism, knowledge of your subject and dedication to your patient. A blog is where you provide good quality articles on your subject, give clear advice and discuss the latest developments.

Google+

Somewhat of a cross between Twitter and Facebook. An important channel because of the Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) advantages of having a presence and sharing on the site. It is also a mix of curation of content and posting links to your own website.

Channel Strategies

Facebook

On Facebook, the first thing to do is to set up a business page, the content strategy for this page is to position it more towards an

advisory platform and less as a promotional channel. In order to do this, you can mix and match content from third party pages such as hearing aid manufacturers and hard of hearing associations around the world. In fact this approach actually will leverage those pages to your advantage by allowing your page to be visible in the stream of the third party pages. This allows you the opportunity to connect to some of their followers. Those followers obviously have an interest in your products and services or else they would not be followers of these third party pages.

The content does not have to be strictly hearing related, as our patients' hearing loss does not define them. Our patients are people with lots of life interests and hobbies. Promoting items such as gardening tips as part of your strategy may lead to engagement with people you may have not reached before. The posting of local information on your page is also ideal, as is 'liking' local club

pages and re-posting their content. These are an excellent source of both localised content and possible new followers.

Facebook adverts as a medium are highly targeted and not nearly as costly as you may think. The benefits over traditional marketing are that it is live, vibrant and you have complete control over who it is delivered to. You can target the adverts by age, interests and even geographic areas. So in other words, I could place an advert and target it to every Facebook member over 55 in Dublin. How cool is that?

Twitter

Twitter is a different type of platform, which is used to deliver links to content, be it yours or others that you think is fascinating. You post those links in the hope that your followers will find them fascinating and will engage with you in a deeper way. It's like when you were five and found a ten inch worm in the garden. You just had to show it to everybody. Twitter is a bit like that.

There is a thriving audiological community building up on Twitter. I am consistently on the site and a lot of my connections offer really valuable information. A lot of the content I use and some of my ideas for blog posts have come from Twitter. So in this way your use of Twitter actually feeds into your combined online strategy.

Twitter is really important for learning from others, passing on useful information and listening in. The last one is probably the most important, Twitter can be effectively used to listen in to conversations pertaining to products you supply and your brand in a local and targeted way through its search facility. Even though Twitter is limited to 140 character posts and messages, I can truly say I find it the most engaging of platforms.

Your Twitter strategy should be to tweet links of interesting content with your own observations intermingled with links to your Facebook page and blog content. You should engage with your followers, thanking them for their follow and any re-tweets of your posts they undertake. This engagement will build into a community of sorts over a period of time.

Blogging

As I said earlier, a blog is where you get to shine, where you get to show everybody how professional and caring you are. In order to do this you need to give direct, honest and undiluted advice. Write in your own voice, being true to your own thoughts, if you do not, your content will be stilted and your viewers will see through you.

You should also invite credible comment on the posts that you place on your blog.



Again ensure that you answer as directly, honestly and as openly as possible. Your blog is not a news section, although it is okay to repost content that you find really interesting once you reference it and discuss why you find it interesting.

Google+

Google+ is an interesting channel, and there are millions of accounts, but hardly anyone uses them. However, this is not a reason to ignore this channel. As we know, Google is ubiquitous across the web. So purely for SEO reasons having an active presence is probably a good idea. Again this site can be used to post links to interesting content and more importantly links to your own content.

Those are probably the most used channels out there, however there are many more. A recent addition is *Pinterest*, it is becoming quite popular. It is a visual site, a site where you post visual content as opposed to worthy prose.

Before you rush into social media, sit down and outline your strategy for the elements of your online media and the content that you will provide. You should research and think carefully about the following questions:

- What are your key areas of expertise? Are they different in any way from others?
- What can you tell your customers that others can't? What is your unique selling point?
- Can you better inform customers about hearing loss? If so, how?
- Where will you draw information from for your content? Other users, traditional media, manufacturers?
- How will you manage your social media channels? What technology will you use to make it easier?
- Who exactly in your organisation will manage it?

- When a disgruntled customer posts a negative comment, how are you going to deal with it?
- If somebody complains on one of your channels, how will you deal with that?

I didn't say it was going to be easy! Just looking at the last few questions it becomes obvious that social media channels are something that you need to outline a strategy for and not one that fits on the back of a postage stamp. Having said that, it is worth it, it is fun, it is quite exhilarating, it helps you to engage with your customers and potential customers for free! Running the social media channels for my company has been an interesting experience.

The experiment so far has been a success; the very fact that I am writing this article is testament to that. I have engaged with people worldwide, I have introduced new customers to our brand. Several people around the world now are customers of my company because of their engagement with us on the web. I have faced most of the questions I mentioned earlier, and in fairness I had not thought of them before they occurred. So when they did happen I had to think very quickly and without prior planning. Not something I would advise for you, reader.

My comments, answers, advice and offers of help offers were just right to deal with the situations that came up. I would not recommend that course of action to you though; *think* very carefully about every angle before you set off on your journey.

The exercise is not only worth it, it has become an imperative. For SEO reasons you need active social media channels. These channels will assist you to drive and leverage your website in the organic search rankings. Because that is the core strategy, social media involvement is about supporting your core online marketing channel. Your website.