Being Influential Online:
Social Media Tactics for Physicians

Executive Summary

Patients are taking an active role in their health care more than ever before – fueled in very large part by the Internet and the advent of social media. More part of a growing movement than simply a trend, these active and engaged patients, broadly referred to as "ePatients," are turning to the Internet for health information in droves. Eight in ten Internet users, or 60% of all adults, have searched online for health information (Pew Research, 2011) making it the third most popular online activity.

Just as the Internet fundamentally changed how people buy homes or book flights by making information and powerful tools readily available, it's also changing the way people approach health care.   Now people can read reviews of doctors and procedures, access free tools to help manage illnesses and weight loss, or compare physicians' experience and CVs with just the click of a mouse.

ePatients are not just using the Internet to become more educated about health issues, but also to connect with others for advice and support. Sites like Facebook and Yelp have turned what used to be word-of-mouth between friends and family into a full-fledged broadcast medium where information can be shared with hundreds or thousands of people in an instant. Social media also enables more personal interactions. For example, Avvo's online Q&A forum makes it possible for physicians to engage directly with ePatients that, in some ways, harkens back to the days of the house call.

These changes are happening fast. It can be hard for time-stressed medical professionals to know how to participate in social media and manage their presence online. Concerns about HIPAA and liability further complicate matters.

The purpose of this guide is to provide physicians with a time-efficient game plan for establishing an online presence - whether your goal is to attract new patients, expand your referral network or simply to manage your online reputation.

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Social Media Overview

Social media is all the rage. But what exactly is it? Many people think of Twitter; others think of Facebook or maybe LinkedIn.   Social media is really a catchall term for websites and applications that enable people to share information in real time and engage with others online.

Below is a quick primer on the most common types of social media:

Social Networking

Social networking enables individuals, companies or organizations to create online profiles and connect with others. The public can generally view information posted on profiles unless otherwise specified using the networks' security settings.

Examples: Facebook (used by more than 800M people worldwide), LinkedIn (for all kinds of professionals & those seeking a job or hiring for one) and Avvo (for physicians and lawyers).

Avvo
Expert Advice When You Need It Most

LEGAL   HEALTH   Sign in with

Questions & Answers   Rated Doctors

Name, specialty, or condition / disease   in   Riverton, UT

Home > Health > Rated Doctors > Harris County Doctors > Houston Doctors > Houston Cardiothoracic Surgeons > Shanda

Dr. Shanda H Blackmon

Avvo Rating

8.4

Excellent

Experience

Industry Recognition

Professional Conduct

What is the Avvo Rating?

Patient Ratings
Not yet reviewed
Are you a patient?
Write a review

✓ No professional misconduct found.

📱 713-441-5177   ➕ Save   ✉ Send to a friend

Dr. Kim Gittere Abson, MD

Avvo Rating

10.0

Superb

Experience

Industry Recognition

Professional Conduct

What is the Avvo Rating?

Patient Ratings
Not yet reviewed
Are you a patient?
Write a review

👍 Peer Endorsements
24 endorsements

📱 206-860-2326   💳 Doctor's website   ➕ Save   ✉ Send to a friend

Overview	
Specialties	100% Dermatology 🛡 Board Certified

Blogging

Blogging enables people to easily post content online in various forms, including personal commentary, articles or lists. Blogs are social in that readers may comment on and share blog posts of interest with their own network. Frequently, like-minded bloggers will link to and promote each other, providing readers with a path to follow for more information on their area of interest. This is collectively often referred to as the blogosphere.

Examples: KevinMD, NakedHealth, SeattleMamaDoc

Microblogging

Microblogging is the same as a blog, except that each post is limited in size. Twitter, for example, allows for 140 characters per post.

Example: Twitter is far and away the most popular microblogging platform with more than 100 million users. It started out as a way to share personal posts like, "I'm at the park! The weather is great!" but evolved into a full-fledged publishing platform and real-time search engine that enables users to instantly see who is saying what about any given topic at any given moment.

Q&A Forums

Q&A forums are places where people can ask questions and receive answers from others online. Some forums, like Avvo, only allow verified professionals and experts to answer questions, making it an effective way for physicians to demonstrate their expertise to prospective patients or other professionals who may make referrals. Other forums like LinkedIn Answers or Yahoo Answers enable anyone to offer advice.

Examples: Avvo.com, Yahoo Answers

Media Sharing

Media sharing websites enable people to share videos, pictures and music. Content from these sites is often included in search engine results for relevant keywords on Google.

Examples: YouTube.com, Flickr.com and sites like LinkedIn, Facebook and Avvo enable users to upload video and images to their profiles.

Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking enables people to bookmark links to their favorite websites, places or products across the web, and share them with their network of followers. Often social bookmarking sites will arrange links by popularity in real-time, making it easy to monitor and scan information around trending topics.

Examples: Reddit.com, Digg.com, Stumbleupon.com
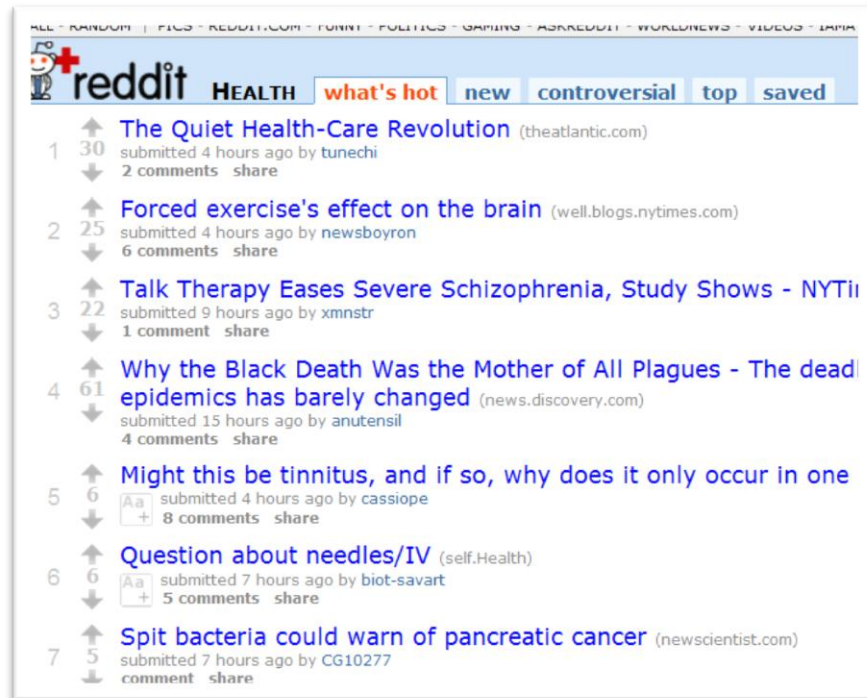
Okay, so a bunch of people are talking online. What's the big deal?

The big deal isn't that people are talking online, but rather that social media is fundamentally changing how ePatients use the Internet to find information about health issues and to research, compare and choose medical providers.

A few examples:

1. In the past, people selected medical professionals based on recommendations from family or friends – or even from a Yellow Pages advertisement. Now they research and compare physicians' online, taking into account the wealth of information that is now readily available, including ratings and reviews from patients, endorsements from other doctors, and the doctors' engagement in Q&A forums before making a choice.

2. Medical providers were frequently thought of as part of larger entities, such as hospitals. Now, that each physician is easily searchable, every physician exists as an individual standing on his or her own merits. In addition to the impact this has on how ePatients evaluate individual providers, now the media, conference organizers, and even attorneys looking for medical experts are using social media tools to identify professionals to contact.

3. Word-of-mouth used to be an informal occurrence offline between friends or family members. Now, word-of-mouth, even between individuals that know each other well, has moved online, often in the form of ratings and reviews that reach a dramatically larger and more public audience.

Given how fast social media is changing how people consume health information and communicate with medical providers, it is understandable that physicians would have questions and concerns about possible HIPAA and liability implications of participating in social media. The next section will address these concerns and hopefully allay any fears you may have that would prevent you from leveraging the power of social media.

The Truth about Social Media and HIPAA

The American Medical Association has recognized that people are increasingly turning to online resources like Avvo, and provides guidance via AMA Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 5.027 ("Use of Health-Related Online Sites") on how physicians should proceed.

Simply put, Ethics Opinion 5.027 notes that physicians participating in such forums should follow the same rules of professionalism that guide their conduct in the off-line world: Ensuring that the information given is scientifically sound, minimizing commercial biases and protecting patient confidentiality. These considerations are vital when providing guidance in any forum, online or off. Rather than attempt to regulate the use of online forums in a different fashion, the AMA has simply reiterated and reinforced this common sense approach, providing doctors with comfort that they can help people online in the same fashion they always have offline.

In other words, physicians participating in social media can avoid missteps by maintaining the same boundaries of the patient-physician relationship as they would offline.

Below are specifics on how this applies to participation in social media:

1. It is okay to answer general questions from ePatients in online Q&A forums or social media outlets. There is no HIPAA regulation that prevents physicians from providing general, non-personally identifiable answers to questions. Whether it's participating in Avvo's Q&A or other forums on- or offline, answering general health-related queries in a public forum does not present a HIPAA-related problem for doctors. These tools offer a powerful means for ePatients to take the first steps to getting the care they need.

2. It is okay to use email, SMS (text-messaging) and social media messaging to communicate with patients, prospective patients, the media, medical industry influencers and other doctors. In fact, HIPAA regulations encourage the use of alternative communication methods, particularly as patients express their preference for a particular mode of communication.

3. Physicians should routinely monitor their Internet presence to ensure that the information on their own websites and profiles as well as information posted by others is accurate and appropriate for the outlet.

4. With regards to liability concerns, answering questions on Q&A forums is simply an online version of something physicians have always done – providing general guidance to those looking for advice. Whether helping to talk through what might be ailing them or locating the most appropriate care, the only difference is that instead of answering questions from neighbors, family and friends, the physician is helping a wider audience of people online. Doctors are not concerned about being sued for advising a colleague about a health issue offline, and shouldn't be worried about providing the same guidance online.

In addition, top Q&A forums clearly note that physician answers are for general purposes only and do not establish a doctor-patient relationship. Here is Avvo's auto-disclaimer:

.wer - Dermatology - Fort Lauderdale, FL

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we

DISCLAIMER: This feature is for general informational purposes only, and use of it does not constitute the establishment of a doctor-patient relationship. Avvo does not select, approve, or limit contributors, and does not review or approve their responses. Contributor levels and designations are based solely on the number of contributions and their user ratings, and do not reflect any endorsement or approval by Avvo. AVVO DOES NOT WARRANT OR GUARANTEE THE QUALITY, ACCURACY, COMPLETENESS, OR APPLICABILITY OF ANY RESPONSES, OR THE QUALIFICATIONS OF ANY CONTRIBUTORS, AND IS NOT RESPONSIBLE OR LIABLE IN ANY MANNER FOR ANY RESPONSES. ANY USE OR RELIANCE ON THESE RESPONSES IS SOLELY AT YOUR OWN RISK.

The American Medical Association offers two additional key considerations for physicians participating in social media:

1. To maintain appropriate professional boundaries physicians should consider separating personal and professional content online. For example, do not use the same Twitter account for communicating with patients or colleagues as you do for communicating with your friends and family.

2. When physicians see content posted by colleagues that appears unprofessional they have a responsibility to bring that content to the attention of the individual, so that he or she can remove it and/or take other appropriate actions. If the behavior significantly violates professional norms and the individual does not take appropriate action to resolve the situation, the physician should report the matter to appropriate authorities.

More information on the AMA's policy around social media can be found at:http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/meeting/professionalism-social-media.shtml

SEO Overview

In addition to social media, another key part of establishing your presence online is optimizing how you appear in "organic" or non-paid search engine results, particularly on Google.   This is called **Search Engine Optimization** (SEO).

Whether you have your own website or not, this section will help you understand how search engines determine what to list at the top of search results. You'll also learn how you can optimize your presence when prospective patients and others search for you or the services you provide.

There are two primary aspects to SEO:

1. On-Page SEO, which are the things that you can do to the pages of your website to make it easy for search engines to find and understand them (often referred to as "being SEO friendly")

2. Off-Page SEO, which are the things that you can do outside of your website to increase its "stature" in Google's eyes – such as generating incoming links from other well-respected websites

Before Diving Into the Tactics, Let's Review Some Background on SEO

When search engines debuted, the method they used to find and evaluate websites to feature in search results was much more primitive than it is today. Webmasters (and a bevy of SEO consultants) were quickly able to detect the criteria used to determine which websites would appear at the top of the search results for particular keywords and would game the system. Back then, websites were rewarded for the number of times the keyword appeared in copy on the site, so consultants "stuffed" pages with keywords, often to the point of making them unreadable.

Sites were also rewarded for the sheer number of other sites that linked to them, regardless of how relevant the linking sites were. As a result, a "paid link" industry, where links were bought and sold, erupted nearly overnight. Unfortunately for Internet users, the mass of irrelevant links made it harder than ever for search engines to find the best content. Fortunately, search engines, led by Google of course, have come a long way since then. They now utilize much more sophisticated ways of measuring the quality of websites and their relevance to what the user is searching for.

Even with this sophistication, you do not need an engineering degree to improve your website's ranking in organic search engine results. There are a set of proven tactics

you can employ to make your website search-engine-friendly. SEO today is about good marketing, public relations and providing a good user experience on your website rather than trying to game the system.

If you or someone at your practice is able to produce great content on your website or on someone else's website that has content about you, you can make amazing SEO progress without even intentionally "doing SEO."

On-Page SEO Overview

On-Page SEO has become somewhat less important over time for ranking compared to Off-Page SEO, as Internet-savvy webmasters have become better at gaming On-Page SEO factors. Still, On-Page SEO remains a key factor in determining where a website appears in organic search results.

Title Tags and Description Meta Tags
Google and other search engines use "tags" to help them understand and categorize websites. The two most important tags on your website are the Title Tag and Description Meta Tag.
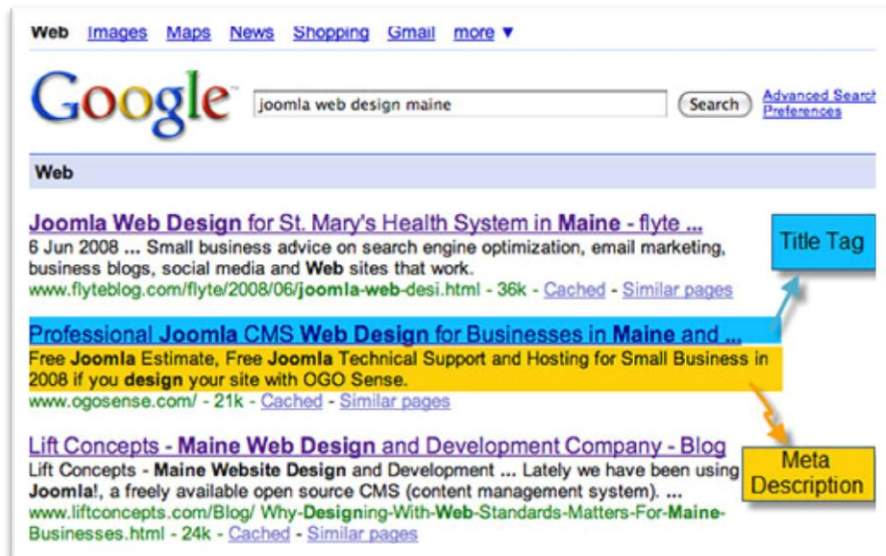
Title Tags contain important text on your site for SEO purposes.

Including the right keywords in your Title Tag can have a big impact in on how you rank for those keywords. While there's no firm rule for the number of keywords to include in Title Tags, the general rule of thumb is to keep the total length of the Title Tag around 70 characters or less, and to put the most important keywords first. Beyond 70 characters, Google may not display your Title Tag in search results, and the effectiveness of the keywords may be diluted.

While the Description Meta Tag does not directly affect your ranking, it does affect how many people click on your listing in Google, which could affect your ranking. In other words, if Google ranks a site number one, but an abnormally small number of people are clicking on it, it will assume that the website is not something people want to see and will lower it in the rankings. So treat the Meta Description Tag as a sign-post for your website and include a description that you feel best represents your website and will entice people to click on your listing.

Three other places on your website where keywords matter
Google may penalize your site for keyword stuffing (i.e. excessively repeating a particular keyword(s) for the purpose of manipulating search engines), but putting keywords in these other places in a way that helps visitors understand what your pages are about is beneficial for SEO purposes:

1. Anchor text of internal links: Anchor text is the clickable text of links. E.g., "Seattle Cardiologist" is a better, more descriptive, anchor text than "Click here."
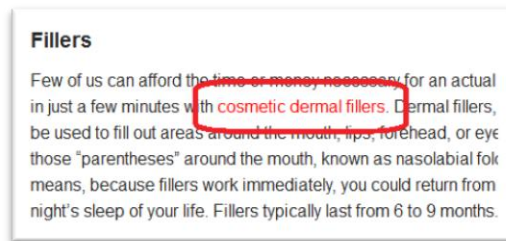
2. Your domain name or URLs: Your domain name is YourWebsite.com. Your URLs are your domain plus everything that comes after the .com. If you'd like to rank for Seattle Cardiologist, it's beneficial to have the domain name SeattleCardiologist.com. It's also better for your page to say XYZ.com/seattle-cardiologist.html than XYZ.com/23423423-2323.html

3. The main body of content or text on a page: This is simply the main content of your web pages that you want people to read. Don't go crazy stuffing in keywords here, but if you'd like your web page to rank for "Seattle Cardiologist," then those keywords should appear at least a couple times on the page, in ways that appear natural to the reader.

Determining which keywords to focus on
SEO is ultimately about ranking highly for keywords that your target audience is searching for, but how do you know which keywords to target? There is simple research you can do to identify the right keywords for driving qualified traffic to your website from search engines. There are generally three factors to consider when deciding which keywords to target:

1. Are people searching for it?

To see how many people search for a given keyword, use the Google KeywordTool:
https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal

2. Does a particular keyword produce qualified visitors (visitors interested in what you're offering)?

The only way to answer this question for certain is to install analytics (like Google Analytics, which is free) on your website, which will allow you to see how visitors behave on your website. If you don't have analytics on your website, then you'll have to use common sense and experience.

3. Is the effort required to rank well for a particular keyword worth it?

Some keywords can be incredibly difficult to rank for (e.g., "doctor"). As a very rough proxy for difficulty, type in a keyword in Google and look at the top 10 sites already ranking well for it. If the top 10 is filled with well-established sites it may be very difficult to pass them in the rankings.

However, there is gold in "long tail" search results.

The long tail refers to less commonly searched, but more specific keywords. As noted above, keywords like "doctor" are very competitive from an SEO perspective. However, less popular, but more specific keywords, like "female doctors who treat skin problems in Seattle," are much less competitive and often more valuable.
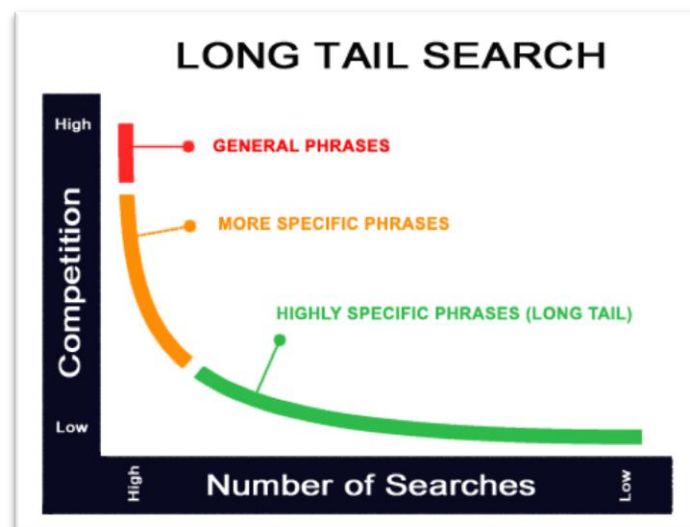
Long tail keywords can be valuable for three key reasons:

1. They make up 80-90% of searches on Google. Although they may not attract a lot of searches individually, cumulatively long tail keywords can generate significant traffic to your website.

2. Long tail searches typically indicate that the person searching is getting close to making a decision. People typically use broad search terms at the beginning of their research (e.g., "back pain") and use more specific long-tail phrases toward the end

when researching and comparing medical providers to assist with a particular issue (e.g., "doctor Seattle back pain treatment appointment"). Long-tail searches are very qualified and therefore very valuable.

3. Unless you are Angelina Jolie, your name is typically a long tail search. Your patients and prospective patients are searching for your name, so you want to make sure they find the profile that you want them to find. And you want the information they find to paint the right picture of your expertise and services. This is what building your online presence is all about. The next section of this guide gives you step-by-step instructions on how to pull together social media and SEO to establish your online presence.

Off-Page SEO Overview

Let's turn our attention now to Off-Site SEO, which in layman's terms means generating links from relevant, well-regarded websites back to your website or profile page on a website you don't own. These links are typically referred to as "back links" or "in links."

Many have the misconception that SEO is all about the content on your webpage and how the website is structured. It's not. At least 50% of SEO is building links from other relevant and authoritative websites to your website. Having great content on your website alone - without relevant incoming links - is not sufficient to rank highly in search results for competitive and sometimes semi-competitive keywords.

Google and other search engines, in effect, operate popularity contests where links to websites count as votes. Simplistically, the site with the most high quality links will rise to the top. As noted previously, Off-Page SEO, and the value Google places on high quality incoming links, has gained in importance as webmasters have become savvier about how to program their websites to maximize On-Page SEO.

It can be hard to define exactly what qualifies as a "high quality link," but there are some, largely common sense, guidelines that will help to improve your rankings in search results. Links from websites that are recognized brands such as Johns Hopkins, WebMD or Avvo are considered high quality. Links from popular, but perhaps less-esteemed websites such as Ezinearticles.com may not be as valuable, but can help. Beware of acquiring links from disreputable websites, as this can harm your search engine rankings.

Link building

Here are several link building strategies and tactics that Google condones, as well as a number of tactics it warns fall outside of its quality guidelines. Building links that fall outside of Google's quality guidelines may result in a penalty.

Let's start with the above-board tactics:

- Put useful and interesting content (articles, videos, etc.) on your website
- Consider adding controversial content that piques interest and generates shares
- Get mentioned in a press article that links back to your bio and website
- Have organizations you belong to or donate to link to you
- Have a great blog on your website that attracts links
- Do guest blog posts that link back to your website
- Link to your website or your profile page on a website you don't own from your profiles on directories like Avvo.com or HealthGrades

Here is a list of things not to do:

- Don't post irrelevant comments on other sites or blogs just to generate links
- Don't submit your website to numerous low-quality directories
- Don't buy links from sites like textlinkbrokers.com

The above tactics are a good starting point, but there are countless ways to generate high quality links to your website or online profile. As long as the methods used stay within Google's quality guidelines, they'll likely help your rankings.

15 Steps to Establishing and Increasing Your Online Presence

Now that you have an understanding of the different social media channels and how SEO and long tail search can increase your reach, let's bring the tactics together into an actionable game plan:

1. Determine what website or profile you want to be the core of your online presence. Ideally, it will be your own website or your page on your hospital's website. If neither of those exists, you can also utilize your profile page on Avvo, Facebook or LinkedIn.

2. Determine which social media networks will support your core online presence. Each of the social networks has its own flavor in terms of the age, income, education, and interests of its users. Facebook is generally used by individuals for personal connections and by hospitals or companies as a channel for engaging in public conversations with fans or customers. The same can be said for Twitter, however the conversations are more in real-time. Twitter is also an excellent place to share and receive news articles. LinkedIn is generally used by individuals for professional networking. Avvo is used by doctors to actively engage with ePatients who are researching medical issues and providers.

3. Depending on what you select, create your online profile(s). Avvo profiles include a rating that takes into account all the information about you, including your experience, education and awards. *The more complete your profile is, the more accurate your rating will be.* Be sure to include links to your core online presence from each of these profile pages. These incoming links will increase your core online presence in relevant search engine results. If you participate on Facebook and LinkedIn, be mindful of the different security settings, which determine which content can be viewed by whom.

4. Answer questions in Avvo's Q&A forum and join a few groups on LinkedIn that are of interest to you (both are free). This enables you to reach potential patients and build your referral network as well as increase your presence in valuable long tail search results, expanding your online presence even further.

5. Use Google Alerts to monitor your online presence. Google Alerts is an excellent free tool that scans the Internet 24/7 for specific keywords, and then sends you an email alert when it finds a mention of a keyword you're monitoring. To get started, simply go to Google.com/alerts and create alerts for your name as well as your colleagues' names and your hospital. This will allow you to instantly know who's talking about you online.

6. Consider starting a blog to help you become an online subject matter expert in your practice area. Publish quality posts that show off your knowledge and engage with other bloggers via comments to show off your expertise and build your personal brand. If possible, place the blog on your main website to maximize the SEO benefit; otherwise make sure your blog links to your core web presence. See this post for how to get your own WordPress blog for $25/year: http://avvoblog.com/2010/05/06/how-to-get-your-own-wordpress-blog-for-25/

7. Once you've built up a reputation in the blogosphere, offer to write guest articles on other blogs for links and recognition. The more popular the blog, the more it helps increase the search engine ranking of your core online presence.

8. Use Twitter to promote your blog posts (be self-promoting sparingly) and show your expertise by commenting on and sharing top news and commentary in your practice area. You can build a following on Twitter by "following" colleagues or others in the medical field and "tweeting" content that is likely to be of interest to them so they, in turn, start following you. The free tool, Listorious, makes it easy to find and follow people on Twitter that shares your interests.

9. Use social bookmarking websites like Stumbleupon.com or Reddit.com to build links to your core presence by submitting blog posts tailored for their audiences.

10. Upload videos of yourself from your speaking events or others produced specifically for online use to YouTube as well as your profiles on Avvo and LinkedIn.

11. Reach out to other professionals on Twitter and LinkedIn and provide endorsements on Avvo. These are effective ways to foster offline relationships and expand your referral network.

12. Make a list of websites, organizations, colleagues' blogs or other websites that you can recruit to link to your core online presence.

Three additional steps if you have your own website:

13. Make sure your Title Tag includes the top keywords you want to target and that your Description Meta Tag describes your site in a manner likely to incent your target audience to click on your listing.

14. Minimize the amount of important text that is shown on your website as images instead of text. Google cannot read pictures, so if the words describing your website are in an image, Google will not factor that into its evaluation of your website.

15. When linking pages within your own website, use anchor text that describes the page you're linking to. e.g., if you're linking to a page about Botox, use "Botox" instead of "click here." If you haven't already registered a domain for your website, try to register one that includes your target keywords.

Additional Resources

SEO Resources:

SEMrush.com
- Discover which keywords a website ranks well for in search engines.

Adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal
- Know how many people search for a given keyword and its average price per click in AdWords.

SEOmoz.org/blog
- Excellent blog that discusses the finer points of SEO.

Seomoz.org/article/search-ranking-factors
- A list of all SEO ranking factors and a survey of industry experts to see how important each one is.

Toolbar.google.com
- A browser toolbar that allows you to see your Google PageRank score, a 0-10 number that's a rough measure of how important Google thinks your site is.

Social Media Resources:

- Mashable.com
- SocialMediaExaminer.com

Books:

- *Crush It!* and *The Thank You Economy* by Gary Vaynerchuk
- *Groundswell* by Charlene Li
- *Social Media 101* and *Trust Agents* by Chris Brogan
- *Engage!* by Brian Solis
- *Tribes* by Seth Godin
- *Six Pixels of Separation* by Mitch Joel

Getting Started with Avvo:
Find and claim your free Avvo profile at www.avvo.com/claim-your-profile

About Avvo, Inc.

Avvo is the largest expert only medical and legal Q&A resource on the web that empowers consumers with the information and expert advice they need to confidently make the right decisions about their health and legal needs. Avvo is comprised of a free expert Q&A forum, where consumers can ask questions - anonymously if need be - and receive answers from rated doctors and lawyers in their area; an extensive professional directory which features comprehensive professional profiles, patient and client reviews and peer endorsements; and the unbiased, industry-leading Avvo Rating for more than 90% of practicing doctors and lawyers in the U.S. Launched in 2007, Avvo is privately held, with funding from private investors, Benchmark Capital, Ignition Partners and DAG Ventures. For more information, visit www.avvo.com.

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