

Making Productive Use of the Internet



I purchased my first personal computer over 25 years ago. That computer had no access to the Internet (there was no effective Internet for public consumption at that time), and the storage capacity of the computer was limited to 64 kB of data. The monitor for that computer was an old black-and-white television. There were no graphics, and the dot matrix printer that was used was noisy and slow and provided text with very rough, pixelated edges.

It wasn't long before I purchased my second personal computer, one that worked with the DOS operating system, but this computer was robust enough that I was able to convert the operating system to one with a graphical user interface, allowing me to access different programs through icons on the computer. This was my first experience with an early generation of Microsoft Windows. For me, it was a dramatic improvement, although I remember friends who were more computer literate who bemoaned the movement away from keystrokes that could accomplish a number of tasks with very few typed words.

The next generation brought with it a modem that allowed access to the Internet. In those days, the choice of providers was limited, and America Online (AOL) was regarded as one of the most sophisticated locations for Internet access and email. We have all heard the expression "you've got mail"; if my memory serves me correctly, this was the welcoming comment from AOL.

Gordon Moore, cofounder of Intel, made the comment that in the semiconductor industry, the number of transistors would double approximately every 2 years. He also commented that the cost of computer power to the consumer would fall despite the increase in manufacturer cost. Putting these two ideas together, it became clear that the consuming public would likely see increasing utilization of computer technology as it became faster and less expensive over time.

While computers became a vital component in the true "standard of care" in dentistry, we have seen forward-thinking individuals attempting to identify additional uses for computer technology. In this regard, we certainly have seen tremendous changes in our clinical practices with the advent of numerous changes in the way that we address design and manufacturing and even in the direct provision of care.

One of the areas that has consistently received attention is the establishment of effective interchange among dental professionals. Meaningful discussions among clinicians, researchers, and educators have been encouraged, especially in a young discipline such as implant dentistry. A number of professional organizations attempted to create forums or discussion groups, where different topics are raised and discussed by a number of knowledgeable individuals. The opportunity to share knowledge and to provoke interesting conversation seems like it would be very well received.

Surprisingly, the interest in most professional forums started strong but gradually diminished with time. One

of the concerns that was expressed in the early forums was related to issues that may occur when advice is given only to have the individual receiving the information be unable to replicate the results that were described in the forum. This might occur because of variability in skill between the one providing information and the one receiving it, or it could be related to a misinterpretation or misrepresentation of the anticipated results from a specific intervention. Another concern is that usage of forums seems to be sporadic, with high initial interest followed by gradual reduction in willingness to participate. It should not come as a surprise that most clinicians are comfortable performing the procedures that they offer to their patients, meaning that they rarely seek the opinions of others.

Perhaps it's a matter of size. Discussion among a small group will likely be limited simply because there are not that many critical topics demanding constant attention. Once a forum reaches a critical mass, it is more likely to become self-sustaining. Of course, it is difficult to determine the number of participants that are necessary to keep such an interchange of ideas vital. Most frequently, the idea of creating a forum has followed a "build it and they will come" approach. In those situations, a series of topics will be identified in the hope that those topics resonate with the participants. If no consistently relevant topic is identified, the site may well fall into disuse.

Times are changing, however. It now appears that a number of discussion groups are being established and are serving as locations for ongoing professional improvement. Large organizations are finding traction in hosting research forums. It is a great way to provide an interchange of ideas and may be an opportunity for users of the scientific literature to discuss publications with the authors of those publications. Although it has taken awhile to get to this point, it appears that from here it should be self-sustaining.

As a frequent visitor to discussion groups, I have to admit to one frustration. There are times when other participants will request an opinion and references to support that opinion. To me, this sounds like a request for someone else to provide a literature search and conclusions from that search. When that happens to me, I will perform the search, because this is how I address most questions, but will not provide the results of that search. My comments will identify the number of references that could be identified through a cursory search of the literature. From there, I suggest a more comprehensive search. After all, there are benefits derived from a search followed by development of an opinion based on that search. We might want to participate in the forum, but it must be a mutually beneficial endeavor.

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