PROMOTING AUDIOLOGY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

BY CAROLYN SMAKA AND TINA PENMAN
Audiology is a smaller and younger profession than many of its allied health counterparts, and as a result, may seem to run a bit below the public’s radar at times. Consider that there are approximately 13,000 audiologists in the United States, compared to more than 100,000 speech language pathologists, and just over 200,000 physical therapists (Bureau of Labor Statistics). It’s not a surprise then, that audiologist may not yet be a household word.

Public relations is important to audiology’s future, now more than ever. The role of the audiologist in hearing health care is being challenged by market forces, with new distribution models and new paradigms for the provision of services emerging. In the current stagnating economy, audiology’s scope of practice is attractive to other professions that are less qualified to treat hearing and balance disorders. With sweeping changes to health-care reform, declining reimbursement, and an exploding senior population, it is critical that audiologists are recognized by the third-party payers, policy makers, medical and allied health professionals, and the general public as experts in hearing and balance. In addition to our collective public relations power as members of the Academy, each individual audiologist is empowered to raise awareness of audiology on a local level. Digital tools such as Web sites and social media provide audiologists with an excellent opportunity to influence public mindshare when it comes to hearing and balance care.

**Web Site Personalization**

Your practice is unique. You have specialties, expertise, and a personal approach to doing business. Why should a consumer choose to work with your practice instead of your competition? These are considerations to keep in mind when personalizing your Web site. Professional photos of you and your staff, photos of your office, and content focused on your services and expertise will personalize your Web site to leverage your strengths and engage visitors in those critical first few moments on your site.

Digital marketers use buzzwords such as “engage” and “connect” to describe the types of online experiences today’s consumers are seeking. Consumers on the Web have short attention spans. They are not interested in reading long articles with a lot of medical jargon. Offer interactive options such as online hearing screening questionnaires, sound samples, and clear call-to-action buttons such as “Contact Us” and “Schedule an Appointment” to capture attention and convert Web site visitors into patients.

**Web Site Content**

Yes, content is still king. One common mistake on audiology Web sites is content. It is usually written at too high of a reading level, contains medical jargon, and is not written for the naïve reader. Best practice for writing medical information for the consumer requires writing at a middle-school reading level. This doesn’t mean dumbing things down or using inaccurate terminology or descriptions. For example, use terms that are familiar to
Promoting Audiology in the Digital Age

Consumers such as “hearing aid” rather than “hearing device” or “hearing technology,” and use “hearing test” instead of “audiological evaluation.” In addition, content that is rich in keywords that consumers are searching for on the Internet will help your Web site come up in search results on search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing. A blog is another way to continually add fresh content to your Web site and social media sites, while incorporating keywords that are important for search rankings.

**Video**

Having video on your Web site also helps with search engine optimization (SEO), especially considering that YouTube is the second-largest search engine with over three billion searches per month. Hearing aid manufacturers all have YouTube channels that allow practices to embed on their Web site. Video also makes your Web site more interactive. There is no better way to establish credibility for yourself and the profession than in a personal video introduction. In just a few short minutes, you can showcase your knowledge, professionalism, and passion for audiology in an authentic and powerful way.

**Mobile-Compatibility and Responsive Design**

If your Web site was designed a few years ago, it was likely designed for viewing on a personal computer or laptop. Today, more than 50 percent of Internet traffic is on a mobile device such as a smartphone, tablet, or other handheld device. Web sites that are mobile-compatible have a responsive design and a consistent look across the range of devices. Pinching, scrolling, and zooming are minimized for an optimal user experience. Have you ever searched a Web site on your smartphone only to become frustrated by an outdated platform that doesn’t allow you to dial the phone number from the Web site or to access all of its pages? Try accessing your Web site from your smartphone to determine where you may need to make updates.

**Search Engines**

A state-of-the-art Web site needs to rank well in search results in order for consumers (and referral sources) to find it. SEO is designed for improving a Web site’s ranking in the organic results. An SEO specialist who is familiar with the ever-changing search algorithms and legitimate techniques for improving a Web site’s ranking may assist in this area.

Claim your local listings on Google, Yahoo, Bing, and Yelp so that your Web site comes up for consumers searching in your local area. Consider whether investing in paid search advertising makes sense as part of your overall marketing plan. Finally, for long-term high-ranking search engine results, an offsite SEO strategy is essential. Offsite SEO is accomplished “off the pages” of your Web site through quality inbound and outbound linking to other highly ranked, authoritative Web sites.

**Social Media**

What is social media? Social media “refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, exchange, and comment on content among themselves in virtual communities and networks” (Ahlqvist et al., 2008). This includes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, etc. Think of social media as an online cocktail party. Just as at a real cocktail party, you can engage in conversations with one another; they’re just online instead. You may have social media users who over-engage on social media—these are your uncensored friends who update their status for everything and anything—who may be viewed as the life of the party. However, you may also have social media users who remain quiet, but observe everything that’s happening. These users are similar to the wallflowers at a party. Social media is designed to promote two-way interactions between users, so it’s important to find balance—somewhere between the life of the party and the wallflower—to be successful.

Some audiologists have used social media accounts to promote private practices, hospitals, schools, audiology graduate programs, professional organizations, funding organizations, individual clinicians, and other audiology-related groups. While some social media platforms may fizzle (Myspace) or evolve over the course of time (Facebook), the concept of social media is here to stay. A Nielsen Company report (Q3 2010 v. Q3 2011) illustrated a 109 percent social network growth in the age 55+ year-old group. These baby boomers are our target demographic, as they will continue to experience even more hearing loss as they age.

Professional organizations are also starting to use social media more because it is extremely cost-effective and fast. An audiologist using social media may hear about opportunities for funding or grants faster through social media platforms compared to another audiologist who waits to read the quarterly newsletter; thus, the audiologist using social media may have an advantage.

Additionally, did you know there is a research journal dedicated to the use of social media in health care? The *Journal of Medical Internet Research* is an open-access journal with an impact value of 4.7, described as “the leading peer-reviewed journal for health and health care in the Internet age.” For the hearing researchers in our
field, social media use is a prosperous area for further investigation.

Lastly, social media provides a grassroots opportunity for audiologists to educate the general public about who we are and what we do. This is a perfect opportunity to highlight our profession!

As audiologists and communication experts, it is critical we are well versed in all types of communication platforms. Think outside of the box and you will realize, yes, this includes social media.

Tell the Story
The future of audiology depends on our ability to be recognized by the public as the experts in hearing and balance. The life-changing work that we do every day with our patients is a powerful story. Web sites and social media can be effective means to help each of us tell that story.

Carolyn Smaka, AuD, is editor in chief of AudiologyOnline, and is based in New Jersey. Tina Penman, AuD, is an audiologist at the National Center for Rehabilitative Auditory Research (NCRAR) located at the Portland VA Medical Center in Portland, Oregon. Opinions are their own and do not reflect the opinions of their employers. The authors are members of the Academy’s Public Relations Committee.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Mindy Brudereck and the other members of the Academy’s Public Relations Committee, and Kelly O’Keefe from AudiologyDesign, for their support and ideas that helped to shape this article and the AudiologyNOW! 2014 presentation upon which it was based.

References

