

Is Your Practice Recession Ready?

12 Online Marketing Tactics to Help Elective Medical Practices Weather an Unsteady Economy



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As of March, fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating oil price wars led JP Morgan economists to forecast a recession for the U.S. and European economies by the summer of 2020. Whether or not a recession materializes, consumers who are insecure about their economic future may be less inclined toward discretionary medical expenditures. Clinics offering elective medical services will surely experience some level of distress and operational disruption in these uncertain times. You may be losing sleep over cash flow and looking for a means of gaining an edge in a tight market. You're likely seeking greater security and stability in your marketing investments.

For Etna Interactive, this is familiar territory. We have served the digital marketing needs of elective medical practices for almost 20 years and through several economic downturns, including the Great Recession of 2007-2009. What we observed then was that elective healthcare consumers were fewer in number, took longer to commit to their procedures, and were more price-sensitive than in the past. The tactics recommended in this report can help you respond to today's unsteady economy and sustain or increase the demand for your elective medical services.

In this white paper, we detail 12 tactics clinic leaders can implement to reach a greater share of the available patient population online, make smart marketing investments, and transform this moment of uncertainty into one of opportunity.

1. Diversify Your Lead Capture
2. Narrow Your Focus
3. Follow Consumer Demand
4. Get Scrappy on Social Media
5. Forecast, Advertise & Optimize
6. Build Your Subscriber List
7. Work on Your Local Optimization
8. Commit to Search Engine Optimization
9. Fill Your Last-Minute Vacancies
10. Partner for Success
11. Deliver Exceptional Patient Service
12. Enrich Your Online Reputation



1. Diversify Your Lead Capture

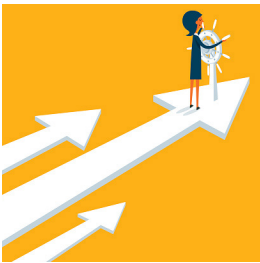
During the recent economic peak, many clinics were disinterested in communicating with patients who were not immediately ready for consultation. Not surprisingly, the only call to action you could find on the pages of these sites was to “Request Your Consultation.” Patients today may be less certain and will benefit from softer and more varied appeals.

The purpose of any online form is an exchange of value. We trade with prospective patients something they want for something we want—namely, their contact information and permission to start the conversation. So what can you offer patients who are not immediately ready (or practically able) to come to your office for a consultation?

Consider these offerings to entice prospective patients to open the dialogue with your clinic:

- Virtual consultations
- eBooks or downloadable guides
- Newsletter subscriptions
- Registration for a promotion or contest
- “Ask the Expert” inquiry form
- Live or virtual event registration

Right now you need every opportunity to dialogue with prospective patients and inspire them to book a consultation with you. Look to create new opportunities to connect with prospects online.

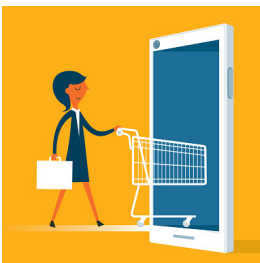


2. Narrow Your Focus

When inquiries were tighter at the start of the Great Recession, “I’ll take everything,” was a common refrain among our clients. Anecdotally, we observed that the clinics who, instead, concentrated their marketing investment outperformed the generalists.

Whereas a rising economy can lift demand for all procedures, a contracting marketing budget can lift demand for only a few.

In lean times we want to balance short-term and long-term marketing tactics but need to do enough of each so that it makes a difference in lead volume. When resources are tight, ensure the marketing channels you choose are sufficiently funded to perform optimally and that your messaging across those channels is aligned.



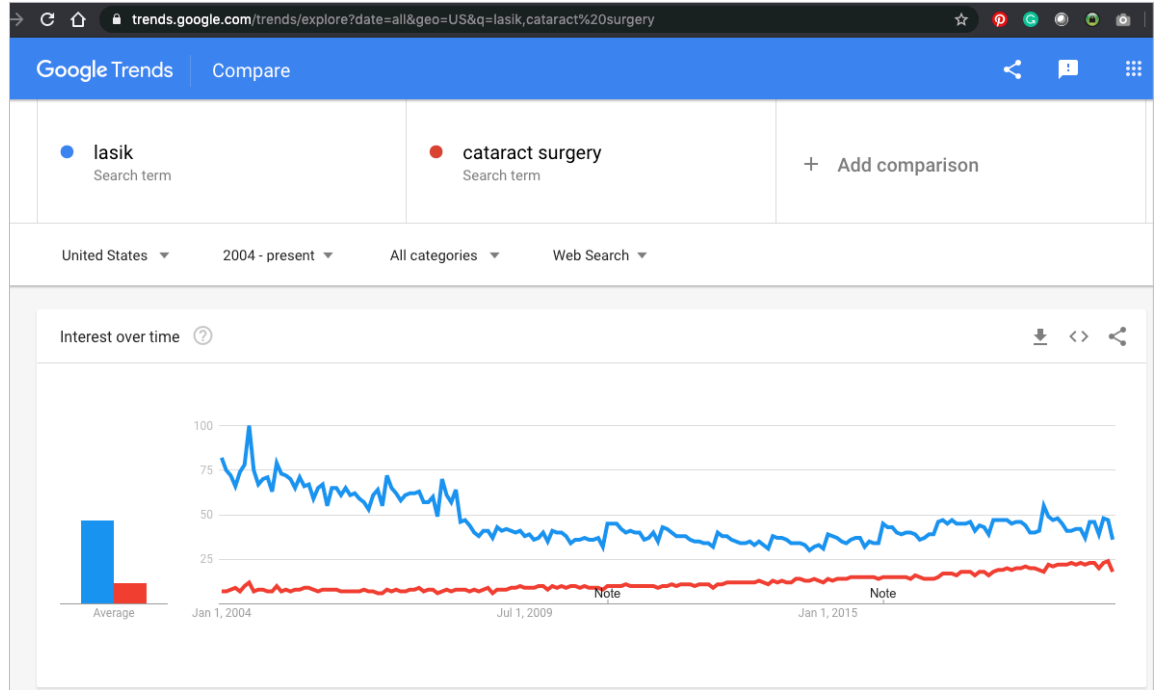
3. Follow Consumer Demand

Patient demand should play a role in the lane you choose—after all, the only certain way to ensure cashflow is to offer services patients want. Not every segment of the elective healthcare market shrunk during the last recession. And while there’s nothing you can do about mandatory office closures, you can follow consumer sentiment when your doors are open.

Google Trends (<https://trends.google.com>) is a free service that provides data on consumer search behaviors dating back to 2004 in near-real-time. With the tool, you can compare how interest in procedures and brand names has evolved over time. Consider these examples.

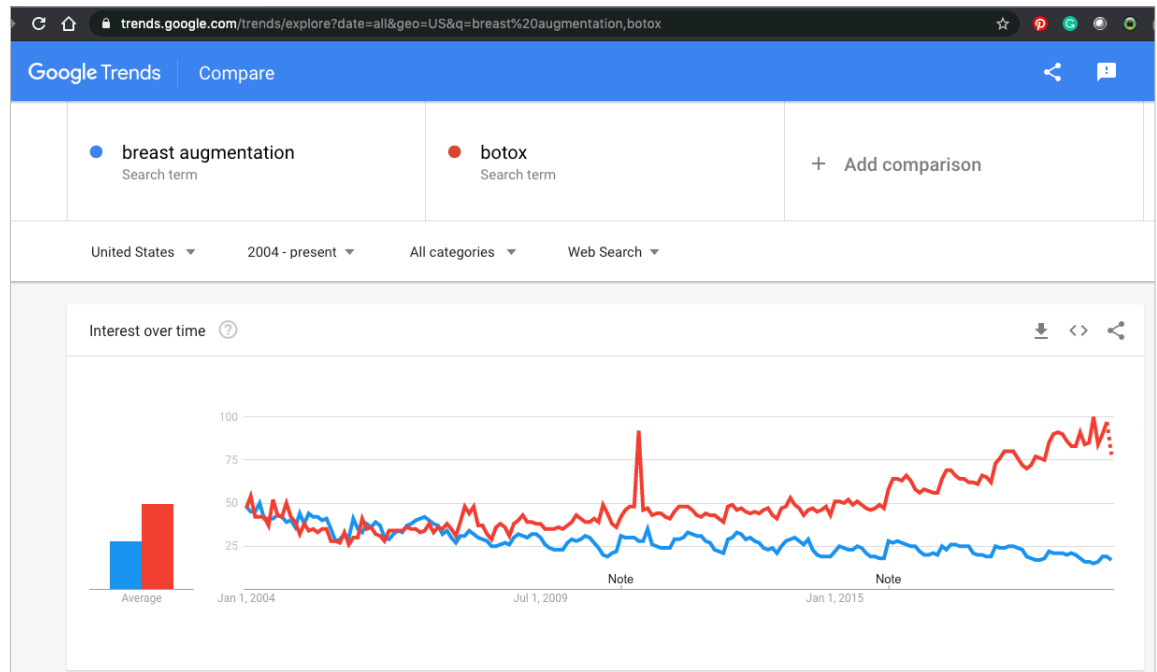
Minimally invasive procedures, value procedures, and procedures with shorter recovery deserve special consideration when evaluating marketing priorities in lean times.

Interest in LASIK never fully recovered after the Great Recession while searches for cataract surgery have climbed steadily:



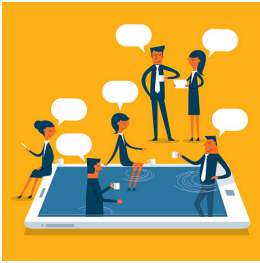
<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=lasik,cataract%20surgery>

And while research into breast augmentation has gradually declined over the last 16 years, interest in BOTOX Cosmetic grew modestly after 2008 and took off in 2015.



<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=breast%20augmentation,botox>

Identify those services you believe will see stable or growing demand through economic uncertainty and then align your marketing to capitalize on these trends.



4. Get Scrappy on Social Media

In January 2018 Facebook (owner of both Facebook and Instagram) implemented a change to their display algorithms that severely limits the visibility of posts from businesses. As a direct result, as few as 0.1% of the people who like your business on the social platform may be exposed to your posts. Today, there are 2 ways the average clinic can reach patients on the most popular social media platforms: indirectly through the posts of patients and directly through paid advertising.

Take note of our use of the phrase, “the average clinic.” While many clinics aspire to social media stardom, few attain it. Try to count on your fingers the number of social superstars you know within your medical specialty. Did you get past 10? The bottom line is that if it were easy for anyone to “go viral” on social media, there would be more doing it.

If you’re already a star on social media, keep doing what you’re doing and skip to the next section of this white paper. For everyone else, read on.

Consider posting signs within your office to alert patients that you welcome social media posting within the office and reminding visitors to respect and protect the privacy of other patients.

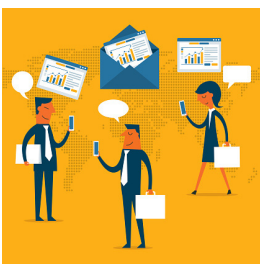
The changes implemented by Facebook in January 2018 do not apply to posts from individual users. There’s no algorithmic throttle on the photos, memes, and videos from our families and friends. This means that today a massive number of followers for your business may be less valuable than a smaller number of followers who are posting about, or sharing content from, your clinic. Hubspot offers a fantastic article on these [changes in organic social media post reach](#).

The opportunity here is to support and encourage your patients to share their experiences with (and even within) your office on social media. While we need to be mindful of the privacy of other patients within the practice, consider how you can partner with your patients to empower their social posts.

While patient posting may be complicated to influence, you have direct control over your social media advertising strategy. Social media ads can cost-effectively target populations of prospective patients at various stages of their journey toward an elective procedure.

There are multiple ways to buy visibility on popular social media platforms. While novice users can land on successful advertising creative and audience segmentation, we recommend you partner with your agency to devise a winning social media advertising strategy.

It’s fair to expect that the social media advertising pool will be flooded with advertisers as the COVID-19 crisis wanes. Now is a good time to practice and hone your social media marketing abilities, and connect with patients who may be ready to pursue an elective procedure the moment social distancing directives are lifted.



5. Forecast, Advertise, and Optimize

The allure of online advertising is targeted immediacy. In a matter of hours, you can position your clinic in front of any number of prospective patient populations. But there’s a downside to paid promotion online—the cost.

If you consider that it will require thousands of impressions and hundreds of clicks to attract even a single paying patient, the allure of online advertising can fade. Indeed, many clinics report past disappointments with programs such as Google or Facebook Ads. Today you can largely avoid subpar performance or outright financial loss with predictive modeling.

By combining data provided by the advertising platforms about search volumes and clickthrough rates with compiled data on average landing page-to-patient conversion, it is possible to forecast an estimated return on your online advertising investment before you ever spend a dollar.

While this analysis may be difficult for many clinics to perform on their own, you can partner with an agency to identify the procedures and spend-levels that are most likely to deliver a positive investment return.

Additionally, clinic leaders are often surprised to learn that the most visible ads are rarely from the advertisers who pay the most. All the major ad platforms use algorithms that reward ads that demonstrate exceptional creativity and congruity. When ads trigger high user engagement and remain relevant throughout the user experience, the platforms show those ads more often for less money.

“ The most visible ads are rarely from the advertisers who pay the most. ”

Those same algorithms cut both ways. The platforms penalize erratic advertisers. A start-and-stop approach to paid advertising will undo any advantage you can earn on the platform and ensure you pay the maximum price for any outcome.

Smart clinics will model their paid campaigns before they invest, carefully craft campaigns for relevance and engagement, invest at a sustainable level, routinely audit advertising investment return and then actively optimize to improve on that return.



6. Build Your Subscriber List

Today, subscriber lists come in two flavors: email and SMS (text messaging). Subscriber list marketing is one of the most inexpensive and effective ways to reach the ideal audience of patients and prospects. Your list(s) will include people who have a past connection to your clinic and who have given you permission to market to them. During lean times, could you ask for anything more?

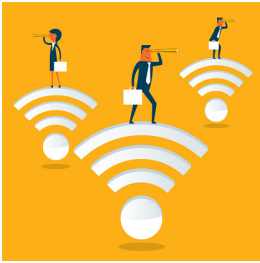
The short answer is, yes. More subscribers, please!

The bigger your list, the more cost-effective each communication. On most platforms, there's little difference in effort or expense to broadcast an email or text message to 5 or 500,000 subscribers. While the time to focus on list-building is before a critical need, there's no time like the present.

When marketing budgets are squeezed, one of the best ways to grow your subscriber list is by reallocating the budget previously assigned to brand building, such as social media advertising. It makes good financial sense to apply those funds to actively encouraging list growth with messaging that attracts new patients and re-activates past patients.

Two words of caution. You cannot add just any email or mobile number to your list. Common courtesy, and patient privacy laws, require that you get explicit permission before adding a subscriber. And even after you have the proper permission, subscribers can be fickle. The surest way to shrink subscriber count is to send irrelevant or overwhelming amounts of messaging.

If you're ready to take steps to grow your list, visit our blog to learn [10 ways to build your subscriber list](#).



7. Work on Your Local Optimization

Grab your phone and perform a search on Google for your medical specialty or top service alongside the name of your city (e.g., “LASIK Boston”). Odds are that after a few paid advertisements the search results will be dominated by a map highlighting 3 to 5 local businesses. Securing one of those coveted local rankings requires different tactics than traditional search engine optimization—tactics you need now more than ever.

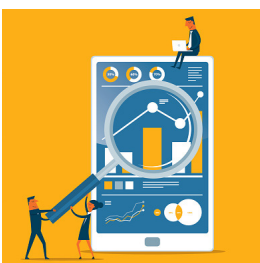
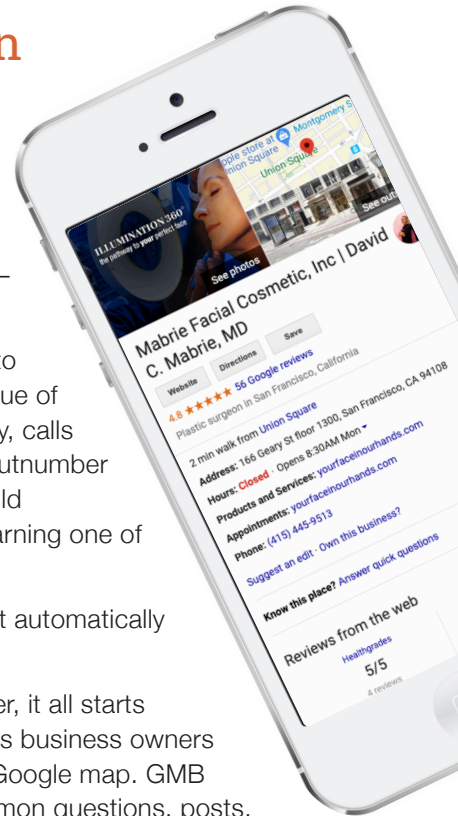
Despite its prominent position atop Google search results, it’s easy to overlook the map. As a clinic leader, you need to understand the value of appearing among that limited set of featured local businesses. Today, calls and clicks originating from those Google map search results often outnumber those from the traditional “organic” web search results, and you could potentially double the number of referrals coming from Google by earning one of those 3 spots in the “map pack.”

Many clinic owners wrongly assume that their agency’s SEO support automatically includes optimizing for the map—but it rarely does.

So how will you get in the map pack? For you or your agency partner, it all starts with your Google My Business (GMB) listing. This free tool empowers business owners to manage how they appear on selected Google searches and the Google map. GMB listings today can be enriched with media uploads, answers to common questions, posts, text messaging integrations, booking links, detailed service menus, and most importantly, business reviews. The more you enrich your GMB listing, the better your chances of earning top rankings.

Other factors improve your ranking potential. Sites with strong search engine optimization are more likely to also earn top spots in the map. The consistent application of one name, address, and phone number across the Web also helps. Consistent citations, or mentions of your business, on prominent websites, is further help, as is the accumulation of positive reviews on trusted third-party websites like Facebook, Yelp and Healthgrades.

Check whether you appear in the Google map results for the searches important to your clinic. If not, engage your team or agency on a campaign to secure this important real estate.



8. Commit to Search Engine Optimization

The majority of North Americans rely on Google to inform their every health and wellness decision. Those that receive a referral to a specific provider ITRW (in the real world) will almost invariably turn to Google to validate that recommendation. So, for clinics hoping to reach more new patients, Google represents the single most influential online opportunity. Even modest success with search engine optimization (SEO) will help you attract more new patients than any other online channel.

SEO is about momentum. Google keeps a close eye on both your site content and the nature and number of third-party websites that link their pages to yours. Google is especially interested in how your site and backlinks change over time. If you abandon either, leaving your site static or failing to attract new links for extended periods, Google will abandon you in return.

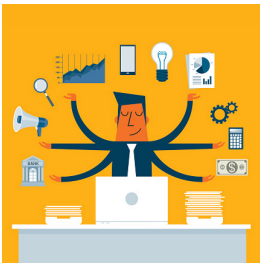
In our experience, abandoning SEO for even 3 months will result in slow but steady ranking declines. Worse than the loss of rankings is the loss of momentum. Upon resuming SEO tactics,

6 months or more may pass before rankings begin to climb again. And you can count on some of your competitors to sustain or accelerate their SEO investments to take over market share; as these players push their way up, any idle sites are faster pushed down.

With few exceptions, bursts of activity can be as detrimental as abandoning SEO. Site owners who have recently undergone a redesign, or been subject to various forms of link hacking, know this to be true. During a website redesign, when there are even small changes to nearly every page of a site, it is common to see major ranking fluctuations as Google tries to make sense of the new site. And a variety of linking scenarios that result in the massive accumulation of new inbound links in a short time can appear to Google as unnatural linking patterns and trigger ranking penalties.

While certain aspects of “technical SEO” are increasing in importance, the steady investment in content optimization and the accumulation of relevant inbound links to your site remains the cornerstone of contemporary SEO.

While it might be tempting to abandon SEO efforts, even for a time, the best advice we can share is to keep your momentum. Clinics hoping to hold their ground must commit to at least one SEO tactic each quarter. Clinics that aspire to take market share will need at least one tactic monthly. This is your baseline for long-term, efficient marketing growth.



9. Fill Your Last-Minute Vacancies

It's common among aesthetic clinics and medical spas to keep a waiting list to fill unexpected openings in the best of times, but how will you fill an opening if you've already worked through your waiting prospects? Clever clinics will create systems to both communicate and incentivize just-in-time bookings. Specialty email lists, opt-in text alerts, or invite-only Facebook groups can all serve this purpose.

If despite your best efforts, you still find a hole in your schedule, you can use the time to make a meaningful contribution to your own online marketing.

- Author an in-depth blog post. Today the best-ranking blogs are detailed and rich in supporting media (illustrations, photos, and video).
- Enrich your website. Introduce new text, photos, illustrations or video content to the pages that cover your most important procedures. Find inspiration from real patient queries by entering the procedure name into www.answerthepublic.com.
- Broadcast evidence of your success. Publish new before and after photos (with descriptive text) or real patient stories to your site.
- Shoot a video. Grab your phone and shoot a short video to publish to your YouTube channel, social media, or site.
- Get the news out. Write and distribute an email newsletter.
- Enrich your GMB listing by adding answers to common questions, parking information, booking links, media, or service menus.
- Study social media before you post. Become a student of what inspires patient engagement (reactions, sharing, and comments) and participate in crafting social media content.

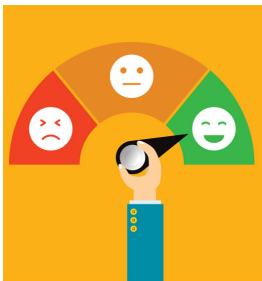
Ideally, you have solutions in place to keep your appointment book full, but vacancies are inevitable, especially when the economy is sluggish. Downtime needn't be unproductive time; use it as an opportunity to invest in your clinic's future growth.



10. Partner for Success

Industry is suffering right alongside elective medical practices. Many of your industry partners will already be planning for an aggressive post-COVID promotional push to recover sales lost during the period of clinic disruption.

As soon as your initial response to the COVID crisis is formulated, reconnect with your industry representatives. Let them know that you would like to explore co-marketing opportunities and their promotional programs as soon as you are able to resume seeing patients.



11. Deliver Exceptional Patient Service

How can you preserve the relationships you have and attract more patients from the inquiries you receive? Exceptional patient service is at least part of the answer—especially when it's documented and shared in patient reviews.

We've all heard the maxim that it costs 5 to 10 times more to attract a new patient than keep an existing one. Whatever the multiple, preserving valuable patient relationships should be a priority in lean times. Many clinics overlook investments in internal marketing and patient retention, assuming that patients are fundamentally loyal.

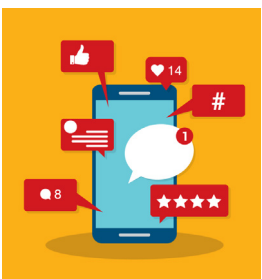
However, patient loyalty is a myth. Ask most women, for example, about their most loyal service relationship and many will name their hairstylist. Ask them next how many mistakes (service snafus or sub-optimal outcomes) their stylist could make before they defect; the most common answer is one or two.

Patients evaluate you on more than your outcomes. From the thoughtfulness and professionalism of your communications in these complicated times, to the experience at check out, now is the time to polish the patient journey from start to finish.

Not surprisingly, service also has a significant impact on new patient attraction. In research performed by Ashley Cloud Consulting, clinics that model a patient-centric approach to call handling attract 3 times as many patients as the average clinic.

The service experience is highly dependent on your leadership and the attitude of your team. The recent labor shortage may have meant tolerating less-than-optimal customer service behaviors. Now is the time to concentrate on retaining your top talent, recruiting service superstars, and talking often about the experience you aspire to deliver. By focusing on the service experience you can keep your "loyal" clientele from looking elsewhere and attract a disproportionate share of prospective patient inquiries.

Now is the time to actively communicate with existing patients, especially those scheduled or due for service. And begin developing your communication plan for when you can return to normal operations.



12. Enrich Your Online Reputation

One of the inevitable side effects of delivering exceptional service is a stellar online reputation. That said, most clinics still struggle to achieve a truly representative reputation online. Sometimes, a little nudge is all it takes.

More than 60% of patients cite online reputation and reviews as highly influential in selecting a medical provider. And most report that they actively avoid clinics with sub-par ratings. Even patients who are not actively seeking online reviews will find them crowding search results when researching providers on Google.

How you respond to online reviews may be as important as the reviews themselves. According to data published by Software Advice, 70% of patients surveyed felt it is “very” or “moderately important” for providers to respond publicly to online reviews. U.S. clinics can visit our blog to learn more about [responding to reviews in a HIPAA-compliant manner](#).

When times are lean, your office should aspire to earn the best reputation in your market. Patients will assess your reputation based on the total number of reviews, your average rating, and the recency of reviews. Whether you employ a reputable software solution or a real-world process to encourage patient reviews, you will earn a stronger, more representative reputation when you actively encourage patients to share their experiences online.



There Is Always Opportunity for Those Who Are Prepared

As we've all seen in recent weeks, panicking serves no one, but careful preparation brings security and peace of mind. It is safe to say that we are headed into unsteady economic times, and the elective healthcare market is likely to shrink. We know from experience that, with thoughtful strategy and planning, you can sustain your practice and claim a healthy share of that market. Our hope is that these tactics help you do just that, and that you come out on the other side better prepared to seize new growth opportunities.



About Ryan Miller

Ryan Miller has guided online medical marketing strategy for leading healthcare providers for more than two decades. Founder and CEO of Etna Interactive, he has helped hundreds of surgeons and healthcare corporations leverage the Internet to grow their businesses.

Specializing in search engine optimization, social media marketing, direct-to-patient online marketing, and lead acquisition strategy, Ryan is a frequent contributor to popular medical industry magazines and speaker for medical societies and business development groups.

About Etna Interactive

Etna Interactive is a digital marketing agency serving medical clinics across North America. Established in 2002, Etna offers strategy, innovative marketing automation products, and award-winning tactical marketing to help private practices and large medical groups attract and retain patients online.

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