
THE DIGITAL CHAIRSIDE

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Local Search Still Matters: What Dentists Need to Know About Google Today

By Kayla Mauldin, Founder, Firelight Marketing

Former dental professional with 23+ years of industry experience

When patients need a dentist today, their first step is rarely asking a friend or flipping through a directory. Instead, they reach for their phone and type a simple phrase into Google: “dentist near me.”

Local search has quietly become one of the most powerful drivers of new patient discovery. While digital marketing trends continue to evolve—especially with the rise of artificial intelligence—local search remains one of the most reliable ways for dental practices to connect with people actively looking for care.

Understanding how Google prioritizes local practices can help dental offices strengthen their online presence and ensure they appear where patients are already searching.

Google’s Local Map Pack Drives Patient Decisions

When someone searches for a dentist in their area, Google often displays a map with three featured practices at the top of the page. This section, commonly called the “local map pack,” includes practice names, star ratings, locations, and links to call or visit the website.

For many patients, this map pack becomes their shortlist. They often compare reviews, proximity, and first impressions before deciding which office to contact.

Google determines which practices appear here based on three primary factors:

Relevance: How closely your practice matches what the patient is searching for.

Distance: How close your office is to the person performing the search.

Prominence: How well-known and trusted your practice appears online.

While distance is fixed, the other two factors are areas where dental practices can improve visibility.

Your Google Business Profile Is the Foundation

The most important local search tool for any dental practice is its Google Business Profile. This free listing controls how your office appears in Google Search and Google Maps.

Practices with fully optimized profiles are far more likely to appear in local results. Important elements include:

- Accurate practice name, address, and phone number
- Updated office hours
- Clear service descriptions
- High-quality photos of the office and team
- Regular patient reviews

Think of this profile as the digital front door to your practice. For many patients, it is their first impression before ever visiting your website.

Reviews Build Both Trust and Visibility

Patient reviews play a powerful role in local search. Google uses reviews as one of the signals that indicate whether a business is active, trusted, and relevant.

Equally important, reviews influence patient decisions. Studies consistently show that patients rely heavily on online feedback when choosing healthcare providers.

Encouraging satisfied patients to share their experience online can help practices build credibility while also improving their visibility in local search results.

Consistency matters here. A steady flow of authentic reviews often carries more weight than a large number of reviews collected years ago.

Your Website Still Supports Local Visibility

While Google Business Profiles are essential, your practice website still plays a critical role in local search.

Google analyzes website content to better understand what services a practice provides and where it operates. Clear service pages, location references, and educational content can help reinforce relevance for local searches.

Additionally, websites that load quickly, work well on mobile devices, and make it easy for patients to request appointments tend to perform better overall.

In other words, your website and Google Business Profile work together to tell a consistent story about your practice.

Local Search Continues to Evolve

Google's search results continue to change as technology advances, particularly with the introduction of AI-powered search features. However, the core principles of local search remain the same: clear information, trustworthy signals, and a positive patient experience.

Dental practices that maintain accurate information, encourage patient feedback, and present their services clearly online are the ones most likely to remain visible as search technology evolves.

The Takeaway

Local search is not a trend—it is now a fundamental part of how patients find healthcare providers. By maintaining a strong and accurate presence on Google, dental practices can ensure they remain visible to the people who need them most: patients in their own community.

Digital Chairside Tip

If you haven't checked your Google Business Profile recently, take five minutes this week to review it. Make sure your office hours are accurate, your contact information is correct, and that you've added recent photos of your practice. These small updates help Google—and potential patients—see that your practice is active and trustworthy.

The Digital Chairside is a recurring educational column designed for dental professionals who want clear, practical insight into today's digital landscape. Written from a dental-first perspective, each article breaks down marketing, technology, and patient experience topics in a way that's easy to understand, ethical, and actionable— without hype or sales pressure. The goal is simple: help practices make informed decisions that support growth, trust, and long-term success.

About the Author

Kayla Mauldin is the founder of Firelight Marketing and a former dental professional with over 23 years of experience in dentistry. She works exclusively with private dental practices, helping them navigate marketing, technology, and patient engagement with clarity and integrity.