

Instagram as a Marketing Tool for Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Residencies: Overcoming Resident Recruitment Challenges in the Year of COVID-19



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The COVID-19 pandemic has radically altered the conventional approaches used in recruiting oral and maxillofacial surgery (OMS) trainees interested in pursuing advanced training programs. Programs are faced with the challenge of how to best disseminate information to interested applicants, including information about the education they provide, clinical locations they serve, and the cities in which they are based. Traditionally, externships have served as a good resource for applicants. Extern experiences are often considered the most immersive and effective way for prospective trainees to understand the intricacies of a program. However, throughout 2020, externships have largely been suspended. In addition to externships, many programs rely on the in-person interview process as an opportunity to provide program specifics to candidates. Interviews are typically structured for prospective candidates to obtain the bulk of essential information about a program. Owing to travel restrictions and social distancing guidelines, many OMS programs have been forced to rethink the interview process, which has largely shifted to a virtual format.

It is important that programs adapt to overcome the barriers to disseminating information about their program. An effective way to attract future applicants is through the use of social media platforms. Instagram is currently one of the most popular platforms used

by residency programs. It can be used to upload pictures and videos of cases and procedures, introduce faculty and residents, or to share other pertinent information to the specialty. These posts have the potential to reach over 1 billion people who are active on Instagram, including 75% of 18- to 24-year-olds and 57% of 25- to 29-year-olds.¹

Instagram's user interface offers multiple display options for sharing posts. A carousel post contains multiple images in a specific order that can be viewed by swiping to the left. This feature is especially useful for sharing cases that have preoperative, intraoperative, and postoperative images, as well as radiographs. Individual photos can also be posted to the account profile or displayed using the feature called a "story". When photos or videos are added to a story, the shared images expire after 24 hours.

As of June 5th, 2020, only 17 of 91 (18.7%) OMS residencies had an Instagram page, 15 of which were dual-degree programs and 2 of which were single-degree programs. This pales in comparison with other specialties such as plastic surgery, of which 74 of 99 (77.4%) residencies had Instagram pages and 36 of 103 (35.0%) ENT programs.² The notable discrepancies between OMS, plastic surgery, and ENT residencies having presence on social media is indicative that the OMS field is missing out on a salient marketing opportunity.

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Age Range

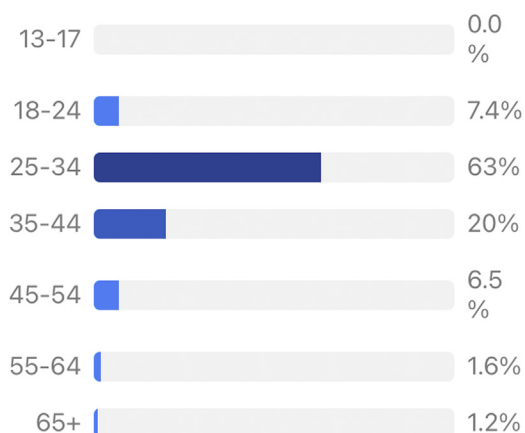


FIGURE 1. The largest population that follows our Instagram page is 25-34 year old men. 90.4% of our followers are under the age of 45.

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Current literature explores how frequently social media is used to promote OMS compared with other specialties and if the use of social media presents a risk for workplace misconduct or adulteration of professionalism. However, there is lack of information on how successful use of social media effects recruitment and if applicants are interested in residency programs having social media presence.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of creating an Instagram account to expand communication with applicants of a 4-year oral and maxillofacial surgery residency program. We hypothesize if programs create social media presence, particularly through Instagram, it will aid in programmatic growth, allowing for a convenient and cost-effective way to market a program to prospective applicants. In this study, University of Cincinnati (UC) Division of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery conducted a survey. This survey was focused on evaluating how interested the prospective applicants were in a program’s Instagram account and the growth of social media interactions since the account was created in July 2020.

Methods

We administered a cross-sectional 2-question survey regarding Instagram usage. The survey was sent to 275 of 279 applicants to the UC OMS residency program. The 4 excluded applicants provided invalid emails. Owing to the nature of the survey, this study was granted an exemption by the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board. The study team received 18 responses to the questions “Do you think Instagram pages are a useful tool for learning about a program?”

and “Did you look at the UC OMS Instagram page at any point during the application process?” We also gathered data from the website keyhole.com for quantitative growth data for the UC OMS Instagram account since its inception in July 2020.

Results

Since July, the account has shared 26 posts, 13 times through Instagram stories that expire after 24 hours and 13 as posts that permanently remain on the page. The page had 539 followers at the time that the data were analyzed on November 3, 2020. The age distribution was 7.4% being 18-24 years old, 63% 25-34 years old, and 20% 35-44 years old. About 74% of our followers are men and 26% are women (Fig 1). The average carousel post had 52 engagements and the average individual image post had 42 engagements (Fig 2).

Of the 275 recipients of the survey, we received 18 responses (6.55%). Within those 18 responses, 8 respondents (44%) had visited the UC OMS Instagram page at some point during the application cycle. Nine respondents (50%) believed that Instagram pages were a useful tool for learning about a program (Table 1).

Discussion

The goal of this survey was to measure the effectiveness of our program using Instagram to promote the

Most Engaging Post Types

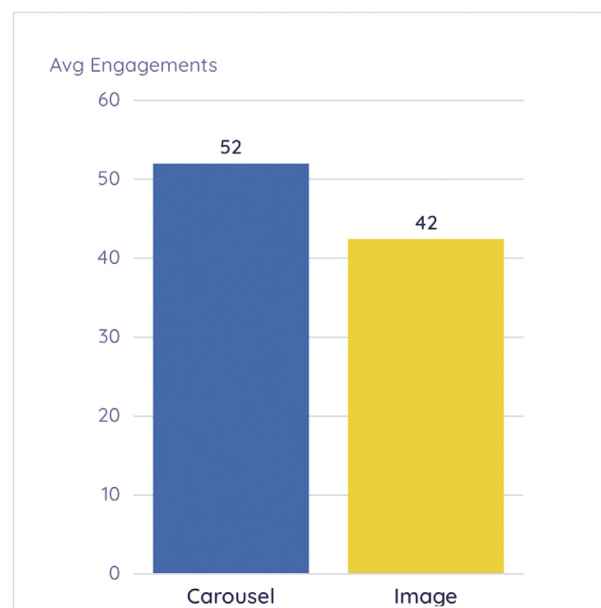


FIGURE 2. The average carousel post on our Instagram page received 52 engagements and the average individual post received 42 engagements.

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Table 1. TWO-QUESTION SURVEY REGARDING INSTAGRAM USAGE

Survey Questions	Yes	No	Total Responses
Did you look at the UC OMS Instagram page at any point during the application process?	8 (44%)	10 (56%)	18 (100%)
Do you think Instagram pages are a useful tool for learning about a program?	9 (50%)	9 (50%)	18 (100%)

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University of Cincinnati Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Residency and to spread awareness about the specialty. We hypothesized the use of social media would facilitate an applicant's ability to learn about our program throughout the application cycle.

The use of social media as a recruitment strategy by residency programs has been steadily increasing for the past few years. The growth of social media has accelerated exponentially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 18.7% of oral and maxillofacial surgery residency programs have an active Instagram page, compared with 77.4% of plastic surgery residencies.² These numbers indicate that OMS residency programs are leaving a viable opportunity on the table. About 70.4% of the followers on the UC OMS page are between the ages of 18 and 34 years, a target demographic for program recruitment. The University of Cincinnati OMS Residency Program received 84.77% more applications in 2020 than its previous year, despite having to cancel most externships. This may be reflective of a general trend in a substantial increase in both medical school applicants, as well as applicants for medical residencies.³ The pandemic has negated the cost of travel and visits for in-person interviews for both and added the conveniences of attending multiple interviews in different parts of the country on the same day; a task that was literally impossible until the interviews became virtual.

Despite the limited responses, 44% of respondents reported visiting the UC OMS Instagram page during the application cycle. We also found that 50% of respondents believed Instagram was a useful tool for learning about a program. This represents a significant portion of the applicant pool that believes there is utility in having social media presence. The type of post

that received the most attention was surgical case carousels, multiple sequential photos in 1 post. The carousel posts, on average, result in 10 more engagements compared to a single photo post.

In conclusion, Instagram is a social media platform that can be used effectively by OMS residency programs to recruit applicants, teach about the program, and spread public awareness. In this study, 44% of applicants had visited the UC OMS Instagram page and 50% found Instagram to be useful tool. With the significant rise in applications that UC OMS received this year and in the setting of COVID-19 precluding externship opportunities, it is more important than ever to enlist as many strategies as possible to inform potential applicants about our program. The posts that received the most attention were carousel surgical case posts, often accompanied by a caption explaining the indications and planning behind the procedure. With other surgical specialties such as ENT and plastic surgery far exceeding the social media presence of oral and maxillofacial surgery,² our specialty may be behind the curve on fully utilizing this opportunity to communicate with the public.

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