

AAO Council on Communications Report

February 2026

The COC meets regularly, typically every other month virtually. Our last in-person meeting was February 6-7, 2026, and our next virtual call is on April 21, 2026.

Below are the Consumer Awareness Program & Member Marketing highlights for FY26.

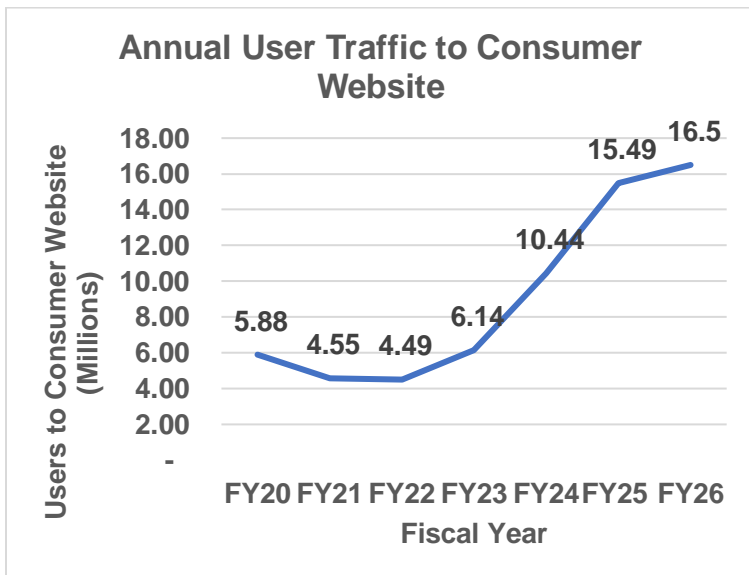
CONSUMER AWARENESS PROGRAM (CAP) UPDATES

The CAP is the only mass advertising campaign promoting orthodontists as specialists and educating the public to see an orthodontist in person. The CAP program currently focuses on digital marketing to drive high-quality traffic to the consumer website.

FY26 Results June 1, 2025 – January 31, 2026:

- o 862MM+ impressions – CAP ads appear across platforms like Google, Bing, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and TikTok, a 91% increase over last year.
- o 15.9MM+ ad clicks, a 43% increase over last year.
- o 16.5MM consumer website page views, a 37% increase over last year
- o 5.7M+ Find an Orthodontist locator page views, a 71% increase over last year
- o Overall, the campaign has already driven over 11.7 million users to the consumer site

Based on pacing, we will welcome over 16.5M consumer visitors in FY26, a 7% increase over the FY25 CAP actuals and FY26 goal.



FY26 highlights so far:

1. **Straight Answers, Bright Smiles:** Launched in August 2025, *Straight Answers, Bright Smiles* will continue through Fall 2026. The campaign addresses frequently asked consumer questions through a series of engaging, educational animated videos. It continues to perform strongly across paid digital channels, with new episodes released every 2 months.
2. **Digital Agency Optimization:** The AAO continues to optimize Consumer Awareness Program

outreach in partnership with its digital media agency, Steady Rain. Year-over-year improvements include increased traffic to the consumer website, page views, ad clicks, and video views. Notably, these gains were achieved while maintaining flat spending, resulting in a lower cost per user and improved overall efficiency. AAO staff provides consistent oversight, including daily dashboard monitoring, bi-weekly agency meetings, and regular reporting to COC.

3. **Search and Answer Engine Optimization (SEO/AEO):** Search and Answer Engine Optimization remains an ongoing focus throughout the fiscal year. As consumers increasingly rely on generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini, COC continues to enhance landing page content and develop new resources for the consumer website. These efforts support organic traffic growth and reinforce the AAO's role as a trusted, authoritative source for both traditional search engines and AI-driven queries.
4. **Smiles at 7 Campaign:** July 2025 marked the inaugural *Smiles at 7* campaign, observed on July 7 (7/7) as a memorable reminder of the recommended age for a child's first orthodontic evaluation. The campaign included assets for member offices, press outreach, and local media opportunities in key markets. Paid social efforts generated more than 763,000 impressions and over 10,300 clicks, while organic social content achieved more than 122,000 views, over 1,000 shares, and strong engagement, indicating meaningful resonance with consumers.
5. **PSA Collaboration with AAOMS:** The AAO partnered with the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons (AAOMS) on the PSA *Milestones Met, Healthy Teeth Set*, which emphasizes the importance of seeing the appropriate dental specialist at ages 1, 7, and 15. Launched in January 2025, the PSA aired on television and radio stations nationwide.
6. **125th Anniversary Celebration:** AAO's 125th Anniversary concluded on December 31, 2025. The milestone year provided an opportunity to celebrate the Association's history and legacy through coordinated programs, marketing initiatives, a dedicated member website landing page, press outreach, and events, reinforcing the AAO's longstanding commitment to excellence.
7. **Bullying Bites Campaign:** The seventh annual *Bullying Bites* campaign coincided with National Bullying Prevention Month and focused on empowering members, patients, and communities to promote kindness. Enhancements in 2025 included expanded national public relations efforts, resulting in more than 500 media placements and a potential audience of more than 165 million. Additional initiatives included illuminating more landmarks in the U.S. and Canada, expanding member resources, collaborating with the AAO Advocacy team to support bipartisan mental health legislation, launching an enhanced partnership with Kind Lips, and renewing the partnership with Stand for the Silent.

New initiatives for the balance of FY26:

1. **Straight Answers, Bright Smiles Expansion**

The AAO will expand the *Straight Answers, Bright Smiles* campaign to include both seasonal and milestone-based content, aligning messaging with moments when orthodontic questions are most relevant, including *Smiles at 7*, back-to-school planning, FSA/HAS planning, and planning for significant life events (graduations, weddings, etc).

2. **Targeted Influencer Outreach**

The AAO will prioritize partnerships of AAO consumer messaging with micro-influencers whose smaller but highly engaged audiences enable more authentic storytelling and more efficient use of marketing resources.

3. **Search and Answer Engine Optimization**

SEO remains a priority, with increased emphasis on Answer Engine Optimization to ensure AAO content appears prominently across traditional search engines and AI-driven search platforms, reinforcing the AAO as a trusted authority.

4. **Qualified Consumer Engagement**

Marketing efforts will continue to focus on driving qualified users to the consumer website, prioritizing meaningful engagement and informed decision-making over volume alone.

5. **Smiles at 7 Day Enhancements**

The AAO will enhance *Smiles at 7 Day* by expanding member participation and activation, and equipping practices with tools and resources to amplify awareness at the local level and extend the campaign's impact beyond a single day.

MEMBER MARKETING UPDATES

The AAO Board of Trustees identified Member-Centric Marketing and Communications as one of three objectives the AAO should prioritize.

Below are updates on our marketing efforts being employed:

1. Member Branding Enhancements

The AAO will launch updated brand guidelines in Spring 2026, developed in partnership with the Brand Task Force. These enhancements will focus on strengthening member communications by tailoring messages to distinct member audiences, improving targeting and relevance, and introducing a more emotive, member-centered tone across AAO outreach.

- 2. Omni-Channel approach to membership marketing:** Our member-centric marketing and communications strategy puts our members first in what we communicate about. The strategy includes increased social media posting, strategic solo emails on specific topics, coverage of issues in the eBulletin, increased texting, and keeping all volunteer leadership informed across all areas of the association.
- 3. eBulletin:** Reading the weekly eBulletin is the number one action we would want members to take with the AAO, and we use this to communicate the important AAO and industry news happening each week. We regularly see open rates above 60% (well above the industry benchmark standard). Each weekly eBulletin is also turned into an Instagram story every Friday, and stories from the eBulletin are shared on social media the following week.
- 4. Member Minute:** In FY26, we are continuing our AAO member influencer program, which has seen increasing awareness and engagement in organic social channels. These videos allow members to hear straight from their colleagues about important AAO news and benefits each month on social media and in the eBulletin. We will have videos around upcoming AAO Events, the Bullying Bites program, the Supplier Network, the new Simon Sinek – AAO Inspiring Leadership program, and much more.
- 5. Ortho Staff Outreach:** Continuing efforts to connect with members' office managers to communicate more easily with offices about marketing campaigns or relevant educational opportunities. We launched a new quarterly communication in September 2024, targeted at ortho team contacts that reaches over 7,500 team members. AAO Staff plan to continue collecting team member contact information twice a year.
- 6. Social Media Outreach:** Over the past year, we hired a Social Media Strategist to focus on enhancing AAO's social media presence. We'll maintain a strategic focus on growing engagement and reach across AAO's organic social channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, X/Twitter, and Instagram) by expanding our audience, strengthening content development, and consistently integrating key member messages. We'll continue to refine and elevate our social presence, especially on Instagram, by producing more Reels that spotlight AAO events, CAP initiatives, and member benefits.
- 7. Texting Initiative:** We utilize AAO texts to highlight AAO breaking news, events, and benefit programs.
- 8. Member Website:** We continue to make improvements to ensure the accuracy of the Member Website and enhance the user experience.