

Developing an Internet Presence for Your Practice

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ABSTRACT

Yesterday, it was the Yellow Pages that informed the public where and how to reach their physicians. Today, it is the Internet. With the Internet, patients have 24/7 access to your practice that will do far more than any Yellow Pages or advertising could possibly do. This article discusses the importance of the Internet for the contemporary physician and how to create a useful and interactive Web site.

A few centuries ago, physicians used a mere shingle to let their patients know where they practiced their craft. One hundred years ago, listing in the Yellow Pages was the accepted method of letting the public and your patients know how to reach you and your practice. Today, and for the foreseeable future, the Internet will be the customary manner of informing existing patients and potential new patients about your services and areas of interest and expertise. With the Internet, you have at your disposal an inexpensive method for being available to your patients 24/7, you can educate your patients and inform potential new patients about the unique aspects of your practice, and you can motivate new patients in an ethical fashion to become a part of your practice. This article discusses the importance of the Internet in the new era of health care promotion and how to create a Web site that will allow your patients to interact with you and your practice.

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Key Words: Internet, marketing, practice promotion, search engine optimization, web site

Neither author has any financial conflict of interest.

For most physicians, the majority of patients they serve come from within their community. A physician's "service area" is usually composed of no more than 3 to 5 ZIP codes or a 25- to 50-mile radius from his or her address. All of us enjoy seeing a patient who has traveled more than 100 miles to see us for an appointment. Imagine the excitement when a patient from 1,000, 5,000, or even 10,000 miles away contacts your office for an appointment. That is exactly what a Web site can do for you and your practice.

The world of the Web is a place of great excitement and opportunity for physicians and their practices. Medical practices have wonderful new opportunities to enhance and extend their relationships with existing patients and to attract new patients to their practices through effective use of the Internet. It is not just another gimmick medium. This medium can reach out to millions of prospective patients efficiently and inexpensively compared to other media, such as a local newspaper advertisement or a direct mail piece targeted to several ZIP codes. The United States has a population of 338,000,000, of whom approximately one-third, or 108,096,800, are Internet users who routinely use, occasionally use, and seek medical information on the Internet.¹ No other medium in history comes close to that level of audience market share.

The process of creating a Web site has simplified so much over the past few years that anyone comfortable with presentation graphics programs similar to Microsoft's PowerPoint or FrontPage (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA) can build a Web page. However, the quality of the output will depend on the skills of the designer. If you are a "techie" with good design skills, then building your own Web site should be fun and easy. If you are moderately comfortable with software applications and have reasonable design skills, you can build a site on your own or enlist some help from a professional Web designer. If you are just starting out with computers, the process might be a little daunting. No matter how it gets done, it is important that your Web site looks professional because it is representing you and your values. You want it to portray quality and credibility.

WEB HOSTING SERVICES

Your first step is to find a service to “host” your Web site. This service maintains a connection to the Internet and allows users to locate and browse your site. The Internet service provider (ISP) you choose to host your Web site should be selected carefully, as it is the quality of their connection to the Internet that determines the speed at which users can view your Web site. Be sure to select an ISP that offers high-speed connections to the Internet. You can find a list of Web hosting services on a Web directory such as Yahoo! (Yahoo! Inc, Sunnyvale, CA): www.yahoo.com.

SELECTING A DOMAIN NAME

A domain name, often referred to as the URL (or uniform resource locator), is your practice’s address on the Internet. It is a personal original address that is truly unique: Once reserved, no other practice or person can ever hold the same Internet address. It is a description that usually starts with www and often ends in .com, .net, .org, or .edu (if the Web site originates at a college or university). When you select your domain name, keep in mind that it will be with you for a long time.

REGISTERING YOUR DOMAIN NAME

There are several “free” services on the Web that will assist you in registering your domain name, including most Web hosting services. You can find various domain name registration services by searching a Web directory such as Yahoo! for “domain registration,” where you then pay an annual fee to maintain that domain name.

WEB SITE DEVELOPMENT—DO IT YOURSELF OR HIRE A PROFESSIONAL?

Web site development can be accomplished using several easy-to-use graphics tools. However, the quality of a patient’s experience when visiting your Web site is directly related to the skills of the Web site designer. Find sites you like and evaluate whether your design skills would allow you to create something similar.

There are two popular types of medical Web sites, namely, “brochureware” and interactive Web sites. Brochureware is an electronic version of your practice brochure. It provides the basics, including your name, address, hours of operation, and telephone numbers. An interactive Web site functions as a two-way highway between your patients and your practice. You are giving out information to get information back in return. An interactive Web site helps you build a relationship with prospective patients or enhance your relationship with existing patients.

There are many ways to make your Web site interactive. Visitors can interact in the following ways:

- Schedule appointments online.
- Download special reports after providing their email address.
- “Ask the physician,” and you can respond using the email address they provide.
- Download special-offer coupons for patients to bring to the consultation or appointment.
- Sign up for an online e-newsletter.
- Work with your online financial tools to help them find a comfortable payment program ahead of time so that price is not the main focus of the consultation.
- Complete paperwork prior to their initial consultation to save time, such as the patient’s health questionnaire or Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 forms. They can electronically send them to the office or bring them on their first visit.
- Learn more about the procedure they are interested in by viewing online learning modules.
- Watch videos of you speaking to the media, demonstrating a procedure, or consulting with a patient, as well as videos of patients’ testimonials.
- Purchase products.
- Pay their bills electronically online.

All of these interactive tools help the visiting prospective patient stay on your Web site longer and allow patients the opportunity to get to know you better. The more you educate them about their concerns, the more likely they are to call or email you for an appointment or for additional information.

If you decide to hire a professional, understand that you can spend as little as \$500 or many thousands of dollars on Web site design. Constructing a state-of-the-art Web site requires the investment of considerable time and energy. You should not try to save a few dollars along the way, as the potential return on your investment is considerable. For the most part, an effective Web site should be a more serious undertaking than a weekend project or one that you turn over to your office manager or to your partner’s teenager who happens to be a high school computer whiz.

If you decide to brave the Internet construction frontier on your own, be sure to adhere to the KISS (keep it short and [at first] simple) principle. Perhaps the best advice is to appoint someone in your office to spearhead the project and to use consultants for larger efforts. This way, you get some hands-on experience, and you can learn from the experience of the professional designer. You can always expand your Web presence from the initial do-it-yourself

model. For best results, have the Web consultants and designers set up your Web site but give you (or your in-house information technology expert) the knowledge and control to update certain aspects of your Web site.

For the do-it-yourselfer, there are various tools from which to choose. The industry standard tool for Web development is Dreamweaver (Adobe Systems Inc, Mountain View, CA): (<http://tryit.adobe.com/us/cs3/dreamweaver/?sdid=CVXKF>). However, many other tools exist that are less expensive and, in some cases, free. Microsoft's FrontPage (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/frontpage/default.aspx>) Web design tool is included in its Office suite. It is a popular program for first-time Web designers.

You can spend a lot of time creating a Web page, and it can be fun and exciting to go from ground zero to a Web presence in a few weeks. However, the best advice is to do what you do best (and that is to practice medicine) and to hire someone else to do the rest!

If you decide to use a professional Web developer, you will need to find one with experience, preferably someone who has designed medical Web sites. A wide variety of individuals and organizations claim to be Web site designers. Some have strong technical skills but poor design skills, or vice versa. Their previous work is the best evidence of their competence, so ask for addresses of sites they have done. The ultimate test is the appearance and user-friendliness of their previous work. When you access these sites, ask yourself: Do they load quickly? Are there links to other Web sites that are no longer functional? Is the design visually appealing? Does it

communicate the desired message? If you are trying to be found organically—meaning that you are being found through your own Web site content for free rather than paying to be found through a search engine—it would behoove you to work with search engine optimization experts who understand the rules of that game and who can design and back-end code your Web site accordingly.

You can use Web directories or even the Yellow Pages to find a Web designer. We suggest that you sample the Web to find sites that are appealing to you within your specialty or other medical Web sites from different parts of the country so you can get a feel for the message and design of other medical Web sites. The name of the developer and his or her email address usually appear at the bottom of the Web site's home page. You can contact designers through their email address and ask them about their fees and their willingness to develop your site. Make sure the designer understands the unique messages you need to communicate as a health care provider.

The bottom line is, if you plan to be in practice for the next few years, the decision is not "if" you are going to join the age of the Internet but "when" are you going to do it? There are many approaches to developing an Internet presence. Select one that meets your needs and your budget, and you will be more than delighted with the outcome.

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