DEVELOPING A WEB SITE FOR YOUR PRACTICE

This practice management consultant removes the mystery from Web site development.

MARJORIE A. SATINSKY, MBA

Think of the number of times you, your family and friends access the Internet. You use the Web to make travel arrangements, make purchases, download music, share information with friends and relatives, and obtain information on topics that interest you. If your tried to investigate a product someone recommended and couldn't find a Web site, you might actually rule out that item altogether.

The value of a Web site applies not only to consumer items, but to medical practices as well. If your patients are online, why aren't you? Neil Baum, MD, author of *Marketing Your Clinical Practice*, comments "Your Web site might be the first impression your patient has of your practice, the way you treat patients, and your attention to detail. If you have built a user-friendly, interactive Web site, this becomes a way to build trust and enhance the patient–physician relationship."[1,2]

The purpose of this article is to remove the mystery from Web site development. It addresses the following topics: the pros and cons of having a Web site, setting goals, exploring options for Web site creation, getting started (ie, picking a domain name, Web site host and Internet service provider), focusing on branding, selecting a vendor, developing content material, tips for attracting attention to your Web site and methods for monitoring Web site activity. Thanks to input from Web site professionals and several practices, there are numerous examples.

PROS AND CONS OF A PRACTICE WEB SITE

Many medical practices regard their Web sites as a second door to their offices that offers improvements in efficiency, reduced spending, increased visibility and enhancements in revenue cycle management. Current patients, potential patients, referring physicians, and others in the community come through that virtual door for a variety of reasons. Current patients may regis-

Important Definitions to Know

Some of the terms in the technical specifications category may be new to you. Here are explanations.

- **Search Engine Optimization** (SEO) offers two advantages. The content of your site gives you optimal visibility on the Web and your site captures a higher ranking on searches from such sites as Google and Yahoo. Techniques for SEO include crafted page descriptions, meta tags, key words, and editorial techniques. For example, for Kenneth Beer, MD, PA, an important combination of words was both the procedures and the geographic area. People search for Botox/West Palm Beach, and when the Web site content contains both words together, the practice gets more hits.

- **Search Engine Marketing** (SEM) is related to SEO but extends into the realm of paid advertising in the search engines. Although advertising is one way to ensure that your listing appears above others, it can be costly if there is a lot of competition in your community.

- **Pay Per Click Advertising** is less expensive than SEO or SEM. Ask your Web consultant for guidance.

- **Tracking and Analytics** are systems that allow you to get as much information as possible about your Web site users. For example, Google Analytics lets you measure Web traffic, path analysis, visitor trends, page views, entry pages, top pages, exit pages, length of stay/page, and browsers and platforms. These metrics can help you make changes in both design and content.

- **Hosting** is a service that stores your Web site and ensures its accessibility on the Internet so that users can find it and browse it 24/7. If the vendor provides this service, check the frequency of backup and downtime and HIPAA compliance. Get details on technical support and security. Ask if the vendor has a high-speed direct connection to the Internet. Many vendors that provide content management systems (CMS) require that sites be hosted on their servers. Here's the rationale: CMS systems often use specific software and database support that needs to reside on the server along with the site. ∎

ter to use a secure area of the Web site for simple administrative functions. Once they sign in with a user name and password, they can request appointments, prescription refills, lab and other test results, download forms to fill out prior to their appointments and pay bills using a credit card. They may receive appointment reminders from their physicians by e-mail. Some practices allow patients to access secure health education information related to chronic conditions and to healthy lifestyles. These advantages mean a lot less time spent on the telephone by both patients and staff. Another potential advantage of a Web site is cost. Al-

though it takes time and money to set up a good Web site, the cost may actually be less than expensive yellow pages advertising that doesn't produce a very good result. These days more people's fingers are likely to walk across the keyboard than through a cumbersome paper phone book.

Patients who are considering coming to your office can use your Web site in a different way. They can learn what services you provide and read about your experience. Patient testimonials might tell them how other patients perceive your practice. Referring physicians can see what care you provide and what insurance you ac-

cept. For example, the Web site of Kenneth Beer, MD, of West Palm Beach and Jupiter, FL, clearly states that he provides esthetic, surgical and general dermatology services (www.palmbeachcosmetic.com).

Are there any downsides to a practice Web site? Some physicians claim that the Web site depersonalizes the practice, negatively affecting the physician–patient relationship. Others say just the opposite — that the opportunity to access a Web site improves a patient's ability to find and communicate with you and strengthens relationships with the practice. Sometimes a negative reaction to a Web site is actually

attributable to the design and content. Does your Web site present just the cold, hard facts or convey the personality of the practice?

SET YOUR GOALS

The best way to create a practice Web site is to start with your own goals. Look at the Web sites of other practices in your specialty and in your community. Some of them provide information only. Others go one step further by letting patients and other visitors use the site to accomplish specific functions. You can offer both information and functionality, or just information. You just need to determine what makes the most sense for your practice. (See "Examples From Your Colleagues," on page 28.)

> *If your Web site looks second rate, visitors to it may assume that they will receive less-than-optimal medical care.*

EXPLORE OPTIONS FOR WEB SITE CREATION

If you definitely want a Web site, the next step is determining how to create it. Do you or one of your staff members have the expertise to create and maintain a Web site, or would you prefer to engage one or more outside professionals? The choice is up to you.

Although Village Pediatrics of Chapel Hill (www.villagepediatrics.com), owned by Kim Gush, MD, is not a dermatology practice, its do-it-yourself approach is instructive for all specialties. Jon Fowler, the Practice Manager, had both computer knowledge and the willingness to learn what he didn't already know. As he explains, all he needed for the practice's informational Web site was hosting and design software. Hosting is a computer connected to the Internet whose sole purpose is to deliver the Web site to whoever accesses it, 24/7. Jon pays about $5/month for the service from www.sageserver.com. His second tool is design software called Web Easy Professional 7. The software is available online or at some retail stores for about $50. Jon

suggests several other design software options for do-it-yourselfers: Web site Tonight, Coffee Cup and Web Builder 5. He's less enthusiastic about expensive design software such as Dreamweaver and Microsoft Expression Web. In his opinion, both are difficult to learn and require Web programming knowledge. Eventually Jon hopes to implement a content management system (CMS) that will allow any staff member to change and update Web site content. Examples are Expression Engine and Drupal.

There are disadvantages in doing your own Web site, so think twice before you assume the responsibility yourself. One big drawback is lack of design and marketing experience. If your Web site looks second rate, visitors to it may assume that they will receive less-than-optimal medical care. Another drawback is inexperience in adding functionality that involves patient data. Most practices lack the skills needed to ensure that their Web site is HIPAA compliant.

If you want external help, engage one or more professionals. Experienced marketing consultants can provide good guidance and help you make a good choice. If, however, you prefer not to hire a consultant and want to go directly to Web site vendors, make sure you understand what you need and express your requirements clearly. You need Web site design, content editing and programming — three different skills. Some companies do everything, but others do not. In such cases, you will need a team of people with complementary skills.

FOCUS ON BRANDING

In an effort to get a Web site up and running, some practices neglect the important concept of branding. The Web site may look and feel entirely different from printed materials — not a good strategy when you want to create a single look and feel for your practice.

If you already have a logo that you like, use it on your Web site, too. If you don't like your current graphics or

don't have any at all, start with Web design and then create your print material. Alice Saunders of Finishing Software in Raleigh, NC, comments, "A major advantage of starting with Web design is the ability to select colors that reproduce well both on the Web and in print. The implications of vertical and horizontal logos and taglines on the masthead of a Web site differ from print material, since space may be more limited. A designer may also recommend that you use a good Web copywriter to help you determine the best information architecture and navigation to use on the site and ways to chunk (ie, group) and cross-link content for easy absorption. Information that has been "chunked" for the Web sometimes produces better copy for print material as well."

Pay attention to the name of your practice, too. For example, Kenneth Beer, MD, PA, gets a lot more recognition than Palm Beach Esthetic Dermatology & Laser Center.

SELECT A VENDOR(S)

Before you select outside help, look at other Web sites. What appeals to you, and what doesn't? Do you want videos, case studies, a before/after photo gallery, or other enhancements? Some physicians like to prominently display before and after pictures. Others, like Dr. Patricia Matheis of Wake Forest Dermatology in Wake Forest, NC, believe that such photos set up unreasonable expectations of perfection. Try navigating around the Web sites that you like, checking to see how quickly information loads and how easy it is to use links both within the site and to other relevant sites. In some cases, you can find the name of the Web site developer on the bottom of each page. Contact colleagues and professional associations for their suggestions.

In my experience, there are good reasons to select a vendor that specializes in creating Web sites for medical practices. Examples are Medfusion, Early Design Group, and Mednet Technologies. These companies know the medical practice in-

Examples From Your Colleagues

Here's a look at what other practices are doing, including examples from practices creating new sites or re-designing existing sites.

Dr. Patricia Matheis opened Wake Forest Dermatology (www.wakeforestderm.com) in December 2009. She regards her new Web site as an integral part of the patient experience. "The message that I wanted my Web site to convey was that of a hands-on and thoughtful approach to each patient's care. My target population is women. As family caregivers, they not only bring their children to the doctor, but also refer their husbands, fathers, brothers and male friends to the dermatologist. I also wanted to convey the idea of a "spa-like" experience. My office is designed as a place of respite from a busy world, and I wanted the Web site to reflect that same sense of serenity and relaxation. Finally, I wanted the Web site to contain links to a dermatology library and a patient portal so patients could access not only their medical information and test results, but also the personalized skin care regimen suggested during the visit. My processes for Web site and interior design went hand in hand. I began by describing my vision to a freelance graphic designer and a Web programmer. The designer first created a logo and then incorporated my preferred colors and themes into the Web site design. The architect and other members of my design team worked simultaneously to create the same message in my physical space. I now have a cohesive flow from my Web site to the office."


Kenneth Beer, MD, PA, completely overhauled his Web site in order to attract more new patients (www.palmbeachcosmetic.com). Explains Barbara LaBounty, Practice Manager: "Dr. Beer is nationally recognized for both his clinical reputation and his activities with the Cosmetic Boot Camp. The practice Web site, however, was not attracting new patients. We sought input from different groups such as patients, pharmaceutical representatives and business partners. In response to their suggestions, we redesigned the site. The menu now runs horizontally across the top of the page, making it easier to access information about our services and products. Guided by an external consultant, our content and key words now attract many more visitors to our site. We measure our traffic, and we make adjustments to both design and content on a regular basis. We've learned that we're never finished, and that our Web site is a continuous work in process."

Dermatology Clinic of Idaho (www.idahoderm.com) redid its Web site in order to address two operational issues, the patient experience and practice growth. Patients were frustrated with the plethora of forms they were required to complete and with the amount of time needed by staff to integrate new information into the existing medical records. Manual processes limited the number of new patients the practice could accept. An information-only Web site wouldn't address these concerns, so the practice engaged Medfusion, of Raleigh, NC, to help it design, set up and host a Web site that offered administrative efficiencies. The practice can now handle 8 to 10 new patients per provider per day, a big improvement over the previous four. When patients fill out information online, the staff can import the demographic information into the existing record with a quick click.

The Skin Surgery Center in Winston-Salem, NC, uses its Web site, www.skinsurgery.net, to provide information on the practice. At this point, the practice does not have a patient portal, and were it to add that feature, it would do so by taking advantage of an option offered through its EHR vendor. Dianne Combs, Practice Administrator, describes the Web site experience as trial by error. Initially, the practice relied heavily on an external consultant to act as the Webmaster and update content. Delays in responsiveness to the practice needs made that relationship unsatisfactory, and the practice tried a service that provides Web site templates. Now it works collaboratively with a different Web site company. Dianne herself uses a free content management system (CMS) called Joomla to make minor changes in copy and move photos to different positions. The external company makes the more complicated changes. ■
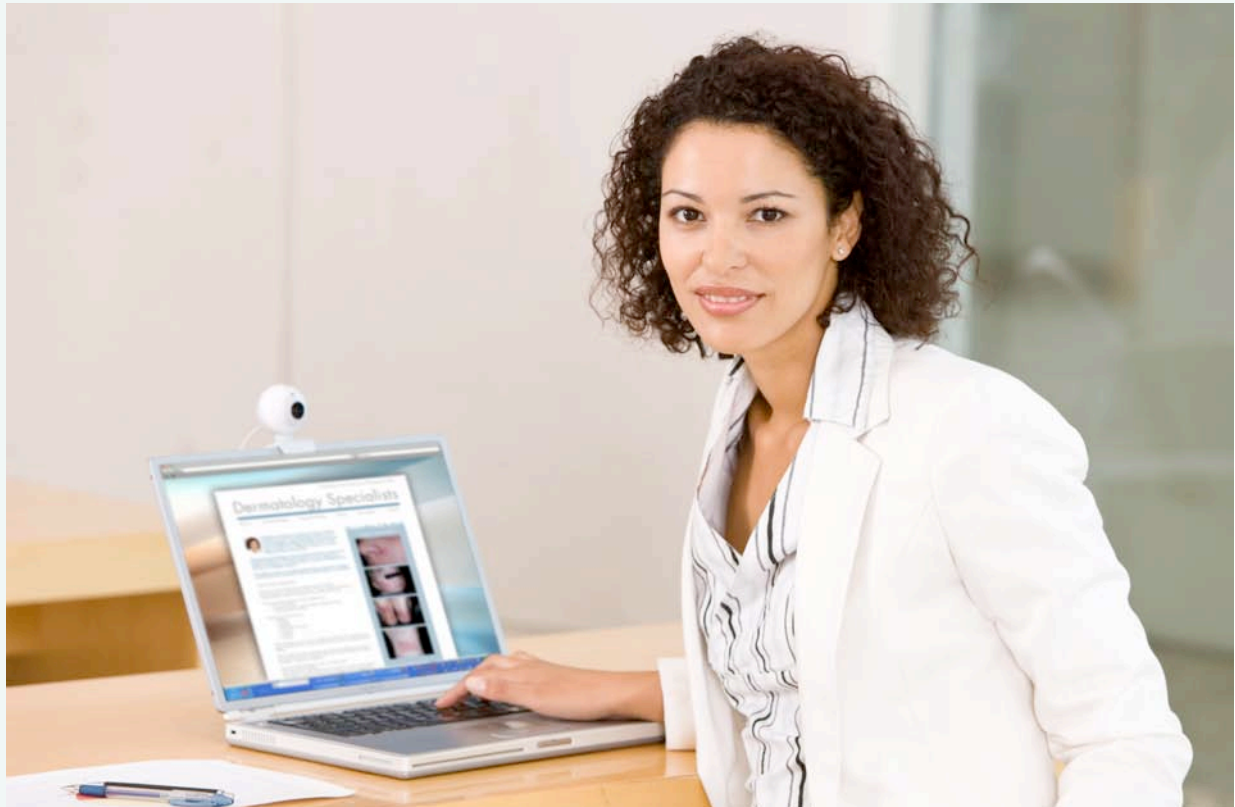
dustry and the unique requirements of certain specialties. Partnership arrangements often give them the capability to integrate the functionality of a patient portal right into other products such as an electronic health records (EHR) system. These vendors also make it easy to link your Web site to other reliable medical sites.

An effective way to get comparable bids for Web site assistance is to develop a brief but concise Request for Proposal (RFP). Here's a list of suggested topics.

- Summary
- Proposal Guidelines and Requirements (eg, open and competitive process, deadline for receipt, fixed price if desired, willingness to incorporate elements of Proposal into final agreement)
- Length of the Contract Term
- Purpose, Description and Objectives (what you want to accomplish)
- Description of Web site that You Want (eg, flexibility, informative, easy to maintain, safe and secure, quick loading)

- Internet Objective (eg, create brand identity)
- Specific Strategies and Required Functionality (eg, focus on existing and/or potential patients, resource for referring physicians, provision of administrative tools that can be downloaded, encouragement of patient communication with practice)
- Maintenance Strategy (eg, will you or the vendor provide updates, and how extensive and frequent will they be?)
- Miscellaneous Related Services (eg, acquisition of domain name and hosting provider, email configuration and support)
- Design Preferences (eg, look, features such as photography or video)
- Technical Specifications: content management system, search engine optimization (SEO), Search Engine Marketing (SEM), pay per click advertising, tracking and analytics, and hosting
- Timeline for Completion
- Pricing Terms (eg, acquiring domain name, hosting, price for template,

price for customization, video and other special features, content management if you are not doing it yourself, monthly maintenance, price per click for some items, service level that you want to purchase)
- Payment Terms (eg, what do you pay in advance versus following completion of the work?)
- Asset Ownership (eg, who owns the assets such as logos and images at the initial project completion? In what format will these items be provided? What, if any, proprietary tools and techniques are being used and are essential for further development and maintenance of the site? What are the license fees for these tools and techniques?)
- Evaluation Criteria (let the vendor know how you will measure its responsiveness to your needs)

GET STARTED

Regardless of whether you create and maintain your own Web site or ask an outside vendor to help you, turn

your attention to three important administrative details before you start on look and content. You need to: (1) pick a unique domain name that nobody else has; (2) select a Web site host; and (3) choose an Internet service provider.

If you are an active Internet user, you are already familiar with Internet addresses or domain names, such as www.aad.org. Common endings for domain names are .com, .net, .org, or, if you are a public agency, .gov. You'll most likely want the .com extension for your practice. Pick a domain name that is easy to remember. Suggestions are your practice name or a short phrase that describes your practice and captures the depth and breadth of the services that you offer. Key words in the domain name will result in better search engine optimization. Make sure that nobody else has selected the domain name that you want. If you find that somebody has reserved but is not using a domain name, you may be able to purchase it for a small fee. Choose your domain name carefully. If you later decide you want to change it, you'll have to go back to INTERNIC, a subdivision of the ICANN domain name authority, to make an adjustment. When you purchase a domain name, you are purchasing the right to use that name for a specific interval. Keep track of passwords, the name of the company with which you registered the domain name, and other details that you will need when it's time to renew the domain name.

As explained above, if an outside vendor develops your Web site, that company may either act as your host or recommend a preferred provider for that service.

With respect to your Internet service provider, you have many choices. Look for high speed, 24/7 back-up and support and good service. Use google.com or yahoo.com to determine your options or ask your Web site designer and/or programmer. These people may have special requirements that influence your choices.

DEVELOPING CONTENT MATERIAL

Presumably you have looked at other Web sites before you began your own project and have a good idea of the topics that you want to address.

At the very least, you want visitors to go to your Web site to learn who you are (name, mission, goals), how to contact your office (phone, fax, email), and how to find your office (driving directions, map, parking). You'll also want to include information about who provides clinical and administrative services with pictures and biographical information on physicians, other clinical staff and key administrative staff. Be sure to offer a list of the services you provide (names of conditions and treatments and brief descriptions), a list of the insurance plans you accept, and information about how you comply with HIPAA (downloadable Notice of Privacy Practices). Also, consider including information or links on how to find information on medical conditions that your frequently treat. If your practice offers a newsletter, let visitors to your site know how to sign up to receive it. Your Web site should offer a section to let patients know what is new with you and your practice.

The use of photography, videos, and blogs is your choice. Alice Saunders of Finishing Software comments, "Featuring a blog can add warmth, personality, and dynamic educational content to your site. Normally, you should use a conversational tone, perhaps responding directly to a question asked by an unidentified patient, or providing commentary on location/national dermatology news. Your goal should be to inform your readers and alleviate patient concern." Keith Cassell of Cassell Design adds "If you decide to blog, commit to adding fresh content. Link your blog to your Web site rather than putting them together."

ATTRACTING ATTENTION TO YOUR WEB SITE

Setting up your Web site is only half the challenge. Once you have your Web site, you want to encourage people to access it. Include your Web site address on all correspondence, including but not limited to letters, postcards, and bills. Post signs in your office encouraging patients to use your Web site. You may even put a computer in your waiting room so patients can access your Web site while they are waiting to be seen. Involve your patients in Web site promotion by asking for suggestions and offering prizes for ideas that you select.

Create and customize listings in online directories and phone books. For example, the Google Maps local business listings appear in Google searches, making them very important. All links back to your Web site will improve your search rank, so create listings for your Web site wherever people look for services online. For example, maintain listings with Yahoo, Superpages, Merchant Circle, Health Grades and Vitals. Again, involve patients by encouraging them to write reviews in Google Maps listings and other directories.

Also, update your site on a regular basis. Google can determine the last time you updated your site. If your site is "stale," your search ranking will suffer.

CONCLUSION

Good luck with your Web site project. Make careful choices all along the way, and remember that you're never really finished! ■

References
1. Baum N, Kenkel G. *Marketing Your Medical Practice*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2004.
2. Brown PA. Web site as online patient service center —— and strategic investment. *Group Pract J. 2008*; October: 44-48.