

7 Surefire Ways

To Market Your Practice On *The Web*

Spread the word about your office on the Internet. Attract new patients and add value for existing ones.

By Robert J. Smith

The World Wide Web offers many benefits as a marketing tool, even for physicians who don't consider themselves marketers. A well-organized, information-rich Web site gets the word out about your practice, with minimal intervention on your part, allowing you to focus on serving the needs of your patients. The Web's reach is phenomenal. Indeed, perhaps the Web's greatest boon to podiatrists is the fact that an effective site can stand for an extended period of time as a global advertisement for their practice.

Potential patients could come across your Web site while searching for a new podiatrist in their area. Current patients could visit your site to e-mail a question or to set up or change an appointment. The Web can help you provide better care for your patients, giving them a resource to consult when they cannot to get in to see you for an appointment.

The time to act is now. Other practices (perhaps some of your competitors) are already on the Web. Keep in mind that it's cost-effective as well. A Web site adds a powerful component to your marketing strategy for mere pennies per customer reached.

In order to provide maximum value for your practice, your patients and prospective patients, you must address these seven essential components of practice marketing on the Web.

1 Plan in advance. Like all good marketing strategies, putting your practice on the Web requires a plan. In order to cre-

ate and flesh out that plan, ask yourself the following questions:

- What goals are you hoping to accomplish by engaging patients and users on the Web?

- Do you simply want to provide basic information—office hours, contact information?

- Are you hoping to create a new means of communication with patients via e-mail and/or site updates?

- Do you want to provide self-penned articles or other interesting articles and advice for healthier living?

With each additional goal you set, you create a new layer of complexity for the site. Complexity breeds options, allowing your patients more opportunities to find value in the site. However, keep in mind the more complex your site is, the greater the upkeep.

Create It Yourself Or Hire A Consultant?

- Will you create the site yourself or hire a consultant or Internet service provider to do it? If you do want to give Web development a crack, choose the right tool and take the time necessary to develop a modicum of skill with it.

"Microsoft Front Page is a decent program," says noted sports medicine specialist William Straw, MD. He used the program to develop a Web site for his own Los Altos, CA practice, as well as one for his friend, Dr. Amol Saxena, a Palo Alto-based DPM.

Even if you're entirely comfortable with computers and your design ability, developing a Web site can still be a little tricky.

"There are some unusual things involved in using Front Page," notes Dr. Straw. "That's the case with any of these programs. You have to play with it. It's not entirely intuitive."

If you decide to farm out the Web site development, be sure to budget how much money you're willing to invest to have someone else (a consultant or your Internet service provider) create the site for you.

What It Takes To Maintain An Appealing Site

- How often will you update the site? Weigh the time constraints imposed by your practice against the hours required to maintain fresh, updated information on your site (see below). It might be best to start with more static information (the basics—schedule, emergency contacts, associated physicians and practices, etc.) until you determine how often you'll be able to address site updates.

- What do you want the site to look like?

The graphical layout of the site is an important consideration. The information you want to provide to patients and users will often dictate the format you use. However, the best formats are usually the simplest, regardless of how much or what kind of information you're presenting. If site visitors have slow modems and have to wait forever for pictures and graphics to download, they may jump to another Web site.

After answering these key questions, be sure to get in the know before getting into the ring. Explore what other practices are doing on the Web. Checking out their designs and overall strategies may help you find your own niche.

Then sketch out a layout of your site—how you want the page to look, what links you want to include and any additional information you feel is pertinent to the goals of your site. Map your site out like a flow chart with your homepage at the top of the chart, flowing down

through other information pages and, if necessary, links out to other sites. Developing a map will make developing the site that much easier.

Stand Out From Competing DPMs

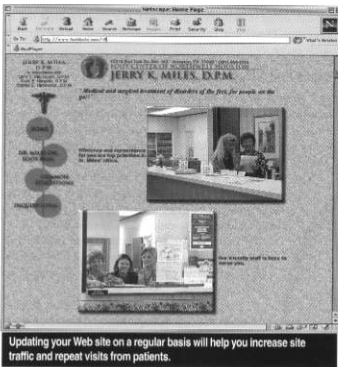
2. Emphasize your uniqueness. You must find ways to set your practice apart from others and translate those differences over the Web. This might be easy on a local level, but remember, your Web site is visible on a global scale. Consider the following key points:

- *Specialties.* Do you perform a procedure no other practice in your area can perform? Do you specialize in an area of podiatric care that sets you apart from other podiatrists within a 100-mile radius of your office?
- *Research.* Are you regarded as an authority in a particular area of podiatric research? Do you publish regularly in medical journals or in magazines such as this one?
- *Technology.* Do your facilities house the latest in surgical or exploratory technologies?
- *The site itself.* Does your site provide a veritable encyclopedia of information that patients and Web users can access at any time?

Value Is Everything

3. Provide value to patients. When patients can access your site and get valuable information, services and referrals without setting foot in your office, you're providing a great value argument for your practice. The key is sticking to your promises. If you are going to provide a forum for e-mail questions, let patients know how long they can expect to wait for an answer. If you say you'll answer all e-mails within three days, do it. Don't make patients wait too long. Otherwise, patients won't look at this service as being of any value to them.

"I've had questions come in from as far away as Australia," says Jerry Miles, DPM, of Houston, TX. "I've had patients come in from as far away as Lubbock—400 miles away from here. I was pretty amazed with that myself, but they were unhappy with their orthopedic care there and thought I could provide them with more help. We did too. I performed the surgery right here."



Three Proven Methods To Track Web Site Traffic

• **Counter programs.** Check with your Internet service provider about the available “counter” options—a service or application that ticks off every time a user visits your site. Some Web development programs offer rudimentary counters, but more sophisticated services can provide additional information, such as points of origination, that the others cannot.

• **Office forms.** Capture information on common patient forms that will tell you whether your patients have seen your site. “We know that people have seen us on the Web because we have a question on our patient information forms that asks where they found out about us,” explains Jerry Miles, DPM.

• **Discount offers.** Dr. Miles also uses a common Web marketing strategy—the discount offer—that is quite uncommon among physician Web sites. New patients who go to Miles’ practice and mention his Web site pay no co-pay for their first visit. Some companies offer a coupon through their sites that visitors can print and bring with them to the office.

“The idea was to get patients to tell me that they saw the Web site, so I could keep track of whether the site was attracting new patients or not,” explains Dr. Miles. “The co-pay is typically \$10 or \$20, so the patients have a \$10 or \$20 incentive for finding the site and then telling us about it.”

“The funny thing is very few people ask for the free co-pay. They just forget about it, I guess.”

Dr. Miles says he knows people are going to the site because they indicate it on the office forms they fill out.

The Importance of Fresh Content

4. **Provide updated content.** Web marketing basics dictate that you should rotate content (articles, answers to questions, etc.) on and off your site at regular intervals, thereby attracting repeat visitors to the site by providing something different each time they visit. The only problem is time. Few physicians have enough of it to spend updating their Web sites.

“Time is probably the biggest drawback,” says Dr. Miles. “I haven’t had the time to answer all of the questions that come in through the e-mail. There are some questions that I’ve had for a month now that I just haven’t had the opportunity to respond to. My original goal was to keep the site (www.footdocs.com) updated regularly, but it just hasn’t happened.”

Dr. Miles’ quandary is one that is shared by many physicians whose day-to-day work in their practices prevents them from keeping their sites stocked with fresh content. Although the need to update regularly depends on your original plan and purpose of the site (refer to your original sketch), you probably won’t get repeat hits if you don’t refresh your content.

Deliver Updated Content

Of course, that doesn’t mean you must be chained to your PC in order to maintain your value to Web-savvy patients. Here are some alternatives to consider:

• **Get it all up front.** Load up on exclusive content when you first post the site, giving yourself a bit of “breathing space” before you need to update the content. Dr. Saxena made his site (www.straw.com/vax4feet.htm) a large repository for information from the very start, providing users with more answers, articles, papers, and links of interest than they could ever possibly read through in one sitting. Therefore, he can update the site at his

own pace and still provide valuable information to patients.

• **Link to auto-update sites.** If you have trouble providing new content on a regular basis, try to hook up with a credible service that can.

“My site has a link to another site that updates every day,” explains Dr. Straw. “It has a ‘Tip of the Day’ and some other material. So there’s something changing every day, since I just don’t have time to put all new original stuff out there regularly.”

• **Stay on top of the news.** Update the site when hot news in your field draws attention to podiatry practices or some related aspect of your field.

• **Keep your FAQs straight.** Use a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page to tackle common issues or questions that patients bring to your attention. The page can handle basic inquiries about office hours, insurance and co-pay information, phone numbers, etc. It can also go into high-level detail about conditions, pain signals and possible treatments.

• **Get administrative help.** Assign an administrative assistant or office manager to check e-mails, research questions and keep your Web site updated. In order to deliver on your promised e-mail response time, see if a junior member of your staff can help you out in responding to patient questions.

Can Prospective Patients Find You?

5. Be easy to find. According to one recent survey by USA Chicago, an international communications firm specializing in online marketing, less than 40 percent of all Web sites are indexed by the major online search engines, such as Yahoo, Alta Vista and WebCrawler. Most Web surfers use these engines to navigate through the Web. Register the site with all three of these services, as well as Lycos, Excite and even lesser-known engines such as Infoseek, Image Surfer, DejaNews.

Make sure your site can be located by both category and keyword search. For the latter, come up with as many descriptive keywords—podiatry, podiatrist, podiatric, foot, feet, medicine—as you can as well as specific conditions you treat.

Look into registering with services that submit your site to a wide array of search engines—sort of a “one-start” shopping method for allowing users to find you. Check out www.submit-it.com and www.netcreations.com for information on this service and/or software that will allow you to register your site yourself.

Increase Awareness Of Your Site

6. Increase your overall visibility. The success of your Web site marketing strategy will, in large part, hinge on how well you incorporate it into your overall marketing efforts:

- **Put your URL into advertisements.** If you advertise in the Yellow Pages, newspapers, or other publications and/or media outlets, place your URL prominently in your copy. You can even link the ads and the site through “teasers” (“Find out more...” “For more information...” and the like) that entice your audience to visit your site.

- **Link with other practices.** Work out a deal with associates or other doctors in your practice, clinic, or hospital who have their own Web sites by placing links to their sites on your site in return for their placement of your link on theirs. You can also accomplish this by setting up a “Web ring,” with a portion of each site’s home page (usually at the bottom) containing a link to and from your page to other spe-

At the beginning, it's a good idea to load up on exclusive content so you can give yourself some breathing room before updating the site again.

“A Web site reinforces the referral,” says Dr. Saxena. A referred patient “can go to the Web and see what I’m about.”

“A Web site reinforces the referral,” says Dr. Saxena. “Another patient or doctor will refer someone to me and they can then go to the Web and see what I’m about. They’ll see that I’m published and that I’m involved with different things. I see 80 or 90 new patients a month and probably a handful of them come from the Web. I don’t do any advertising.”

It’s also important to track how visible you are by determining how many people visit your site. Of course, there are multiple ways to obtain this metric data. (See “Three Proven Methods To Track Web Site Traffic.”)

Make The Site Truly Interactive

7. Help improve patient care. At its essence, the best marketing your Web site can provide is in its ability to help patients. They could use the site to make appointments, gather information for a diagnosis or get answers to questions. They may also get reminders of upcoming appointments, info on pertinent therapies, or other things that can help them in their care and recovery.

As time goes on and you discern new patient needs, you can rework your Web site to meet those needs.

“I’ve gone through several iterations on my site and gradually it has become more sophisticated,” says Dr. Straw. “It was pretty bland at first, but as I learned more about how to do things and saw ways to improve the site, I created several more versions. It’s a lot more useful than it was when I first started.” ■

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cialists’ sites.

- **Join the Chamber of Commerce.** Make sure your practice’s URL is displayed prominently in the business directories, packets and Web sites published by your local Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber of Commerce might also be able to assist you in finding help with Web development, or finding link or Web ring partners.

- **Publish.** If you publish articles or essays in medical journals (or even in more regional publications), include your URL in your bio blurb.

- **Give referring doctors and patients your URL.** If most of your business comes from referrals, there are still benefits to having a Web site.