



Medical practice websites: Getting the most out of them

by Heike Wagner and Silke Wolter



When people are looking for a medical expert to meet their individual requirements, they are increasingly turning away from traditional sources of information—friends, neighbours, yellow pages—and are accessing the Internet instead [1]. So a website has become a marketing ‘must’ for a medical practice if a doctor wants his or her services to be found. But what makes a website not just attractive, but effective in bringing doctors and patients together?

Relevance for the user

Information should always be structured according to the users’ needs: first-time patients want to know who they will be talking to, what they need to bring along, what qualifications the doctor has and what diagnostic and treatment options are offered. What patients want and need to know also depends very much on the problem at hand: an anxious patient will want to know whether the dentist can address his fears, a mother will want to know whether the practice has a play corner and a dialysis patient will want to know how the rooms are equipped and what machine types are available.

Intuitive navigational paths

It is also important to take users’ habits into account when leading them around a site. For example, first level subjects are often listed horizontally at the top of the page and opened levels cascade down to the next levels on the left from top to bottom. This is the way users have learned to navigate sites and they expect to be able to ‘steer’ their way around a site without thinking, like they would a car. Similar principles apply to navigation headlines: clever synonyms of commonly used headlines (e. g. Home, About Us, Services etc.) are unnecessary and subject the user to irritating guesswork. It must also always be easy for users to find their way back to the page above the level that they are on, or to the home page, by making sure that ‘back to [name of page]’ or ‘home’ buttons are clearly visible on every page of the website. Access to relevant information should be made as easy as possible: if users have to search too long, they will quickly leave the site and the chance for winning a new patient will have been lost.

Clear directions for ‘real life’

How do patients find the practice in real life? Where can they park and how much will it cost? It is common courtesy to provide a small illustration of the immediate neighbourhood of the medical practice and the nearest public

transport with an estimate of how far it is to walk from the bus stop or train station. However, scanning and copying maps into a site is an absolute no-no. Maps and photographs are copyrighted by their designers and special permission needs to be granted if they are to be used on the Internet. Adding a link to a map service isn’t a problem, though, and can be a helpful service for patients (e.g. <http://code.google.com/apis/maps/gallery/mapsAPI.html>; or for UK sites <http://www.streetmap.co.uk/idlinkto.htm>).

Interactivity

A site should not just be informative, but also interactive. That doesn’t mean using visual gimmicks and flashy animations. They may interfere with the message, annoy the user, and search engines don’t like them much. Instead, communication between the doctor and the potential patient should be as simple as possible. Every level of the website should have a ‘Contact’ option that can be activated without having to fill out any extraneous forms. Visitors should be able to see the practice’s phone number and opening hours on each page of the website. Medical practices should decide in advance how they prefer to communicate and design the site accordingly to channel patient access: for example, if phone calls during consulting hours are getting out of hand, the e-mail option should be made easiest to access on the site. Further services can include: a list of frequently asked questions and their answers, sending patients an e-mail reminder the day before an appointment, or posting estimated waiting times on the site.

Added value for the patient

Whenever possible, extra value should be added to a site by offering additional information that is relevant for users. This might include links to sites that explain Latin medical terms and the way drugs work or give access to additional health programmes (e.g. weight reduction or rehabilitation). The patient should be informed about the doctor’s professional network and colleagues (e.g. who stands in for him/her during the holidays and for emergency care). Impressive websites stress the importance of prevention: for example, patients with heart disease can benefit from a weekly recipe that suggests healthy food and adds some variety to their life. Service or entertainment can also be put to use, e.g. by announcing art exhibits in the community, highlighting a doctor’s expertise by inviting patients to a public lecture on ‘5 minutes exercise at work’ or by publishing interesting scientific papers on the site.

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Good legibility

Part of good corporate design is ensuring that everyone can read the contents of the site. Many users may be elderly, so the lettering chosen should be large or appropriately adjustable in size to meet different users' needs. The contrast between the lettering and the background also needs to be strong for easy legibility, especially in the navigation areas or on buttons. Fonts without serifs are easier to read, and using system fonts (like Arial) makes the visual outcome on each computer more predictable. So does using web-safe colours, i.e. the specific kinds of colours used to design web pages. Because this topic is rather complicated for a non-professional, it is best to talk to a graphic designer about it and/or read up on it here [2]. Since no one has a handle on other people's monitor calibration, a basic colour scheme is just fine.

Attractive 'look' and 'feel'

And speaking of colours: if someone has chosen their doctor based on a website with a bright and dynamic design, they will be disappointed if they end up in rooms with a white-and-grey colour scheme. Because a website makes a promise that the actual practice has to keep, similar colours should be chosen for both. While playing around with different colour ideas is fine, certain colours merit caution: swimming pool green, for example, may make pictures of staff look like they are slightly ill. An adventurous approach is fine, but should be tinged with subtlety. Designs should always be tested on different computer screens and browsers before going online, since there may be technical difficulties like certain font sizes not showing or lines looking differently than they should. The use of bold to highlight key words that people are likely to be looking, bullet points, simple language, short sentences and short paragraphs with subheadings helps people scan pages more quickly. A common mistake is putting text within a box to make it stand out more. Many eye-tracking studies have shown that people tend to ignore text within boxes if it resembles an advertisement [3]. All the pictures for the site should be taken by a professional photographer because visitors always remember the quality of the photographs.

An important partner: The search engine

Users looking for information on the Internet almost always use a search engine like Google or Yahoo. That means that a website has to be registered in a search engine's database before it can be found. Whether this is the case can be tested, for example in Google, by typing the website name into the search slot like this: 'site:www.my-homepage.com'. Google will then show the links of all the pages on the website that are stored in the Google database. Search engines have their own methods that a site needs to cater to: for example, pictures, animations, or films are hardly relevant for search engines—instead, they focus on so-called 'keywords' that they use to rank the relevance of a site in relation to the search. If the Internet is going to be used effectively to bring a medical practice and potential new patients together, a high search engine ranking is a 'must'.

The power of 'key'words

As a result, a doctor needs to know what keywords patients are using to look for his or her services. It is worth investing in a professional keyword research instead of resorting to guesswork, since a patient's choice of words is often miles away from a doctor's. A doctor may say 'flatulence' or 'abdominal pain' where a patient is looking for 'wind' or 'stomach ache'. When the right keywords have been identified, it is time for a professional writer to use them to their best advantage. Writing for the Internet has its own rules, due to the fact that users are not so much 'readers' as impatient 'scanners' of Internet content.

The writer's role is to strike a fine balance between crafting readable text that clearly defines a benefit for the user, and using enough keywords so the site will be found by search engines. Keywords should be used liberally in headlines, subheads and the first paragraph of texts. Bullet point lists and hyperlinks to further content are user-friendly and add value to a practice website because they help users to scan, navigate and find the information they are looking for quickly.

Finding the website

The intelligent use of keywords determines whether a search engine will judge a site as being relevant to a particular search. Many users type the keywords 'dermatologist in Littletown' when searching for a new practice to register at, so judicious use of the keywords 'dermatologist' and 'Littletown' in the headings, subheadings and first paragraphs of pages will increase the likelihood that the search engine will direct users to the website.

The more relevant a website is, the higher it ranks in the list of search results. That sounds simple, but it entails a lot of diligent work. This process of search engine optimisation (SEO) can be contracted out to professionals, but should be closely monitored to ensure quality. For example, being offered certain rankings for a fixed price will not necessarily guarantee long-term success, since SEO is an ongoing process whose results need to be measured constantly. The technical configuration of a site also determines whether it will be found by search engines, e. g. what programming language or content management system is being used.

A link from another topic-relevant homepage to your site can be compared to a verbal recommendation in 'real life' and helps search engines and people to rate your site as competent. That means that a link from a scientific paper about breast cancer onto the homepage of a gynaecologist helps, but not the one from a florist friend. And beware of service providers that offer links for pay—they tend to do more harm than good. Other ways of increasing search ranking is by making sure the site contains plenty of content (i.e. text) and by adding new content frequently (e.g. announcements, new staff, events, news).

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> Analysing and promoting a site

After investing a lot of time, effort and money in a new website, doctors should always analyse its success. They should ask new patients how they found the practice, monitor traffic to the site, note which key words are leading people there and which topics are generating a high level of interest. Website analysis software (e.g. Google Analytics—see box) can give information on all of this and much more. There are a wide range of tools on offer on the Internet, and many of these programmes are free. By asking the right questions and making adjustments accordingly, a website will become increasingly successful, and the initial investment will have paid off. This success can be improved still further by promoting a site at every opportunity. Staff can ask patients for their e-mail addresses and keep them up to date about news. They can also send out mailings or newsletters by post or e-mail to (potential) patients. Even distributing stickers or give-aways with the URL at the next community event might be helpful. The bottom line is: if doctors make their website a part of their daily practice, then patients will too.

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2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_colors
3. http://www.internetg.org/newsletter/dec98/banner_blindness.html, or <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/banner-blindness.html>

Cardiologist sues former employer under Whistleblower's Act

Dr David Gossman is suing Lahey Clinic in Burlington, USA under the Massachusetts Healthcare Whistleblower Act. Gossman was fired after he asked questions at a lecture on medical ethics at the hospital. He claims that doctors at the hospital were pressurised to use Medtronic products, that a director of the department earns a substantial yearly income as a speaker for Medtronic and that the director's wife holds stocks with and is employed by, Medtronic. Furthermore a new doctor was told to increase her use of Medtronic stents because she was jeopardising the hospital's access to cutting-edge medical technologies. The clinic denies the allegations.

Source: Hughes S. Interventional cardiologist sues hospital under Whistleblower's Act. 3 November 2009 available at <http://www.theheart.org/article/1018685.do>

Google Analytics

<http://www.google.com/analytics/>

This free website analysis tool is one of many that allow you to monitor how visitors are using your site. It can be added to your website by simply signing up for an account and then following the instructions for adding some code (not visible to users) to all pages of your website.

What does it tell you?

You can see how many people visited your website over a particular period of time (you can specify exactly which dates) and many other details such as:

- Which pages were viewed the most
- Which links were clicked on and how many times
- What keywords people used to find your site (i.e. what they typed in search engines immediately before visiting your site)
- How many pages each user looked at per visit
- How long visitors spent on the site and on each page
- What countries users visited from
- How users reached the site
- Search engines (which ones)
 - Direct visit (typed URL in their browser, or clicked on bookmark)
 - Referring sites (clicked on a link from another website)
 - Which sites people were referred from

What does it not tell you?

The identity of visitors and their exact location is not available, and it is not possible to track the website usage patterns of specific individuals. A pilot study, where you watch how volunteers use the website to find specified information, would be more useful to check how user-friendly your website is at an individual level.

How do you use it?

You access data and reports by logging into your Google Analytics account. The login details can be the same as your personal Google account but if there will be multiple users you should set up a new Google account. Additional users can be added as administrators or with restricted access (reports only).

Information is displayed in graphs, charts and tables, and can be downloaded in reports in a choice of file types (e.g. PDF for user-friendly display, and CSV for Excel). The terminology used in the reports is explained briefly in pop-up boxes on your Google Analytics account page. These definitions are not always adequate but fuller definitions and explanations can be found easily via search engines or Wikipedia.

Interpretation of the reports is up to you and your imagination. Otherwise, call in some experts!

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