

Reaching Out to Your Patients Online

Everyone knows that an educated patient is the best medicine. If the patient is informed and involved, the outcome of a procedure or treatment has been proven to be greatly improved. Setting up a website for your patients is one way to allow them to become better educated and allow *you* to establish a connection with them. And many physicians are catching on to the trend. The number of physicians with a website increases every year, and the number of physicians communicating with their patients via email has increased to the point where insurance companies are considering payments to physicians for on-line counseling and treatment. Conducting business over the Internet has impacted practices in many ways, from on-line patient registration to billing and medication reminders. And these advances have the ability to bring down your overhead costs. A website investment has the power to increase your patient load, encourage more referrals, and simply to keep your patients better informed.

However, you may find yourself challenged by finding and updating the information included in your site. Many physicians report a lack of time as the main obstacle to Internet use and developing a customized site. Even if you don't have any computer programming experience, it's easier than you think to build your own site. The first step is to choose a domain name. Do this quickly, as names are going fast and the name you want might not be available. Choose a name that is short and easy for patients to remember when thinking of your practice.

Once you have found a name, there are many options available to assist you in getting started on the actual site development. If you lack the time or interest to create a site by yourself, consider using a web design firm, which may have an expensive price tag attached to it. Another option would be to incorporate the use of an Internet health care company that builds and hosts sites as well as provides content. These companies generally charge a monthly fee or occasionally offer their services at no cost to physicians. Make it easy for patients to find your site by registering it with Internet search engines.

Consider the goal for your site before actual development begins, as this will guide the appearance and what it offers to patients. Which patients do you want to attract to the site? Is there another segment of the population that you will want to be directed to the site? The audience who will be using it will drive the content of your site. On the flip side, who will use your site is determined by the information that you include. Decide if you want your site primarily for patient education, or for marketing purposes as well.

Crucial Details

Your home page should provide certain pieces of information that will function as sort of an electronic practice brochure. Your practice scope should be clearly outlined, along with subspecialty orientations. The name, address, and telephone number should be provided, with a page link for driving directions and perhaps a map. You will want to include hours of operation and contact information, whether it be through email or by traditional means. You should consider a page link to the insurance plans you accept; omitting the list gives you the possibility of attracting a patient not participating in your plans despite out-of-network issues. Many physicians include biographies of themselves along with a photograph. It is up to you to decide how much personal information you wish to share with patients. Be certain to include a disclaimer stating that the information on the site is not intended to take the place of the doctor-patient relationship and any email communication is not appropriate for emergency care. If you choose to incorporate email capabilities, alert users to confidentiality issues and be sure your site is in compliance with HIPAA requirements.

Make Your Site Educationally Based

Consider how much time your staff spends providing background information to patients about their condition or about the latest health trend. These demands can be rerouted to your educationally based website. More sophisticated efforts may come into use, such as video clips and still images of surgical procedures. If clinical patient education is going to be a secondary objective of your site, you can include links to other sites that provide education and patient support. Consider adding links to community support organizations as well.

Allow Your Site to Keep Your Practice Efficient

Consider which staff tasks can be done better by electronic communications. Possibilities include the reinforcement of pre- and post-surgical instructions, condition- specific physical therapy regimens. You may want to allow electronic patient requests for prescription renewals. A unique service could possibly be provided if you can tie those requests to email reminders about prescriptions running low and when to reorder.

Selling Your Patients on New Services

While a website may be able to help your practice attract new patients, it can also be used to market practice-related services to current patients. An example of this is a practice that offers pain management might consider marketing acupuncture and massage therapy services.

Cross-links to other sites are also another marketing tool. Your website could become a referral source for many kinds of health care related services. Incorporate links to your allies and other credible sources to create a personal network of providers, all mutually benefiting each other's practices. Be careful not to include a long list of links to other sites. Only use links to sites that you have reviewed and personally recommend. You may want to include a short description of the linked site to save time for potential users.

If you plan on regularly updating your site, consider discussing current news stories or health developments. This can position your practice as a regional expert. Being careful not to be too judgmental, your practice can effectively be the arbiter of health news in the community.

Make Your Site Easy to Use

In order for your patients to easily navigate the site, make sure it will be simple to use. Limit the use of images, especially large ones on the main pages. Large images make the page slow in loading, a huge turnoff to users. Text loads quickly, so use this primarily, along with small graphics for frequently used pages. Video clips and clinical photos should be kept deep within the website. Incorporate the use of "white space" as well, instead of providing an overload of information on every page.

Page links should be highlighted or outlined for easy navigation, and make your navigation buttons obvious. The best bet is usually to stay with the standard blue underlined word or phrase that indicates a hyperlink.

Use a consistent theme and color scheme or background motif that lets users know they have arrived at a page connected with the main page-don't leave them guessing where they are. You want to have a small version of your practice logo and name at the top of each page so patients will know when they are on your site (and not another site to which you are linked).

Be sure users can get back to the home page easily. Consider sequential and cross-links so users can navigate the entire site without having to always return first to the home page. Ask your website designer or advisor to show you a site map showing all links during the planning process.

Keep your writing clear and concise. Avoid using shorthand, jargon, and abbreviations. For example, you know what a PCP is, but there is no reason that a patient will know that.

What to Avoid

Don't use headings such as "Of Interest" or "FYI". These headings really don't tell people where they are going or what page they will get. Keep your audience routed to where they want to go so they aren't disappointed.

If you plan on including news commentaries, be sure to keep them timely and up to date. A site that hasn't been updated is very obvious and the resulting perception you portray can carry over to the practice.

Avoid using busy backgrounds, whirling banners, and flashing lights on your website. While these are effective for certain applications, they do not belong on a practice website.

Summary

Whether you've been in practice for five years or thirty years, establishing a website can work for your practice. Patients gain a larger role in their care, and a new type of doctor-patient relationship will start to develop. Be proactive and get your website and email address out to your patients. Ask patients for their email addresses as well. Keep an eye on your competitors' sites for ideas, and poll your patients for what features they would like to see included on the website. For better patient education and improved marketing, having a website is a necessary component of your practice.

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