

Web Site Helps Group Compete Against Larger Practices for Patients and Staff



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Street Medical Center and the 126th Street Medical Center, and Doctors Weight Control and Wellness Centers, all located in Ocean City. He attended medical school at the State University of New York at Downstate Medical Center. He completed his internship and residency in internal medicine at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in New Brunswick, N.J., and completed an emergency medicine fellowship at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore. He has written two books on AIDS: *Understanding AIDS: A Comprehensive Guide* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985) and *AIDS: Facts and Issues* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986). Gong has been practicing family and emergency medicine for 15 years. Readers can reach Gong by phone at 410/524-0075 or e-mail at cellulite@compuserve.com. Richard L. Reece, MD, editor-in-chief, conducted this interview. More information on using the Internet is available on our Web site (see page 16).

Q: Why have you been developing a Web site?

A: More than half of all Americans—some 100 million people—use the Internet. According to a study by CyberDialogue, researchers in New York, 50% of respondents say that they would use physician Web sites if their doctors had them. But only about 30% of physician groups have Web sites. Physicians without sites are missing an opportunity to publicize their practices, enhance their efficiency, and reach out to patients.

I view Web site development as a tremendous opportunity for my practice

because most physicians still do not have a Web site. As a group, physicians are still not as technologically savvy as the general population. I knew I would be able to leverage opportunities for my practice by becoming one of the first physicians to develop a site in my area. Our Web site (at www.75thstmedical.com) has been up since March.

Q: Do you believe that physician Web sites will soon be universal?

A: Yes, eventually, patients will expect every doctor to have a Web site.

Q: Why do physicians need a Web site to practice medicine?

A: Physicians need a Web site for several reasons. First, physicians need a Web site because their competitors—other physicians, large medical groups, hospitals, and other health care providers—will have one. Any physician who does not have a Web site will soon be behind the times.

Second, any physician who has a Web site will draw many more patients, especially from those segments of the population that are Internet savvy, to their practices, than those physicians who do not have a presence on the Internet. The people who use the Internet are usually more affluent, more educated, and have higher discretionary income to spend than those who do not. These are desirable qualities in a patient base.

Third, a Web site can make patients' and physicians' lives more convenient and productive. For example, our site includes online registration so that patients can complete forms before they get to the office, saving time for both our patients and our office staff. We have online patient scheduling as well, so that patients can make appointments online.

Fourth, increasingly physicians will need Web sites to communicate with colleagues, especially to refer patients, and to receive referrals. Web sites can streamline and expedite the referral process.

Finally, simply having a Web site communicates something positive about a practice. A Web site is open 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This type of instant accessibility is great for a physician's image. Having a Web site also conveys the message that a physician has a cutting-edge practice and is technologically savvy. If a physician maintains a well crafted Web site, he or she will be regarded as user friendly, warm, accessible—traits patients want from their physicians.

Q: How did you go about constructing your Web site?

A: I surfed the Internet first. I wanted to see what types of sites my competitors had, as well as the sites of other local businesses. Then I looked at some of the Web sites run by very large medical groups. After reviewing these other sites, I was better equipped to define what I wanted to accomplish with my site. Would I use my site for patient education? Would I use it for e-commerce? Would I use it to market my practice? Would I employ it for managing risk? Ultimately, I decided that rather than build an all-purpose site at one time, which would have required a substantial amount of money, I would build the site in segments.

I used a loose-leaf book to help me design the site in segments. I recorded what I wanted the front page to look like and what kind of graphics I thought would be effective. Then I composed the rest of the site, page by page. This allowed me to organize the site appropriately and visualize how the site would look.

Q: What is the primary purpose of the site?

A: I wanted to use the site as part of a strategy of "guerrilla marketing." Guerrilla marketing entails low-cost strategies that enhance the reputation of a business and make it more profitable. It's a great strategy for small businesses that don't have significant marketing and

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advertising budgets, unlike their larger competitors.

The strategy is discussed in *The Guerrilla Marketing Handbook*, by Jay Conrad Levinson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995). The guerrilla marketing strategy impressed me because it is geared toward small businesses and how they can compete with bigger competitors that might spend millions of dollars on marketing. Guerrilla marketing is especially relevant to physicians in private practice, who may feel they are not big enough to compete with integrated delivery systems.

Like most independent physicians, I am a “David” against many “Goliaths.” Although our practice has 20,000 patient visits per year, we still compete with larger medical entities. I wanted to look as big and impressive as the large group practices and large hospitals in my area. The Web levels the playing field, and can fill an important role in a guerrilla marketing strategy. Physicians can project themselves to be as good as the big guys if they are clever in how they design and present information on their Web sites. In this way, the Web site helps my practice become more successful.

Q: *What do you try to achieve on your home page?*

A: The home page outlines the nature of our practice, where we are, and our mission statement. It is a road map that guides the patient to our various services, demonstrates what’s new in our practice, highlights employment opportunities, offers educational points of interest, and provides links to other interesting sites. Our home page also stresses our special programs, such as wellness, weight reduction, and occupational medicine. These are the programs we want to market. We try, for example, to direct new employers to go to our page on occupational medicine. The same goes for

consumers who are into health maintenance, wellness, and weight control.

In addition, we offer employment opportunities for other health professionals. We discuss our practice in a friendly way, describe our office and our corporate cultural beliefs, and state why it would be enjoyable and exciting to work with us. Since we are located in a resort town and require extra help in the summer, we hire a lot of staff who reside outside our area.

We offer free use of condominiums for summertime doctors, x-ray technicians, and physician assistants, for example. To entice summer help, the Web site shows pictures of our condos and of Ocean City. We also provide links to the Ocean City Visitors Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce. Using the site as a recruiting vehicle adds to its utility.

Q: *In your opinion, what makes a good Web site?*

A: The best sites reflect the attempt of the designers to think as a patient thinks. The site’s purpose should be apparent to the viewer when he or she sees the first page. The practice name, address, e-mail address, and phone and fax numbers need to be clear and easy to find. The site also must be easy to navigate. Good color and graphics also are important, and the design should be visually appealing.

Furthermore, it is important for a site to be reader-friendly, like a storybook that can be read in brief sections. Large blocks of text can be a deterrent. It’s preferable to have small referral text that provides links to other text so that readers can delve deeper into more detailed information if they wish.

Finally, physicians should avoid loading up too many images on one page, because this will extend the time the viewer’s computer takes to load the Web site.

Generally, the site should give the impression that the physician’s practice is

the type of organization that the viewer would want to visit. The site’s content should be nontechnical. The site should have a warm and friendly feel and a professional look.

Q: *Is it a mistake to include a lot of prose?*

A: Yes. Excess prose detracts from a friendly image. Initially, many physicians produce an electronic brochure on the Web. That strategy is fine if the physician does not have anything else he or she can do. The trend, however, will be to make Web sites much more interactive.

Q: *Are there malpractice risks due to having something printed on a physician’s Web site?*

A: The physician group is responsible for any information posted on its Web site as well as information that is on linked sites. There are ways around the malpractice problem, however. Physicians should carefully label their sites with disclaimers about the appropriateness and completeness of the information, for example. In addition, the site should clearly state that it is for informational purposes only and that it is best to visit the office so that a physician can assess any health concerns. Any information on the Web site should be thoroughly screened by physicians in the group for accuracy and clarity, and links to other Web sites should follow the same level of scrutiny. Also, physicians can reduce their malpractice risk by quoting the original source of information.

Q: *What methods do you use to promote your site?*

A: We tell everybody and anybody about our site. We put the Web site name on all our stationery and our business cards. We also include it in all of our advertising on TV, radio, newspapers, and the Yellow Pages.

(Continued on page 14)

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(Continued from page 13)

Ideally, once people sign on, Web sites should promote themselves by having useful and accurate content, and by being appealing to the user. Educational materials and content are a big draw, as are links to other reputable medical Web sites. Physicians should update their Web sites frequently—at least monthly, but preferably weekly—so that patients and others will return regularly. Then, the message about the quality of the site will spread by word of mouth. As we increase our awareness among the community and create an image, we will come to be known as the community Internet health provider.

Q: *What do you do to help your site stay current?*

A: We include the monthly columns that we write for the newspapers. We have online surveys that allow us to get feedback right away. We offer health tips on an ongoing basis.

We also have a section called “What’s New.” It’s a friendly summary of what’s happening in our practice. We write about the employees and include news about the practice. We created a link to a Web site about our dog, Abbey, the office mascot. Children and adults alike love to read about dogs. It may sound hokey, but for patients, it’s memorable and sets a friendly tone.

Q: *What are the resources required to develop a Web site?*

A: The site is a growing part of my budget. Physicians can do it for free, or they can spend several thousand dollars. In addition, there is time required for getting the pieces of content together for inclusion in the site.

Q: *Physicians have several options when building a site. They can create their own Web site or they can get a free site from www.medscape.com, www.medem.com, www.salu.net, and others. Why not just get a free site?*

A: Right now anybody can create a free personal Web site on some of the major Internet service providers or doctors might use one of the medical Web sites. The medical sites offer free Web site template designs for physicians. Designing a site this way requires little more than 30 minutes. If a physician wants to get started with a Web site, it’s a good way to try one out, and it doesn’t cost anything.

Free Web site services are a useful option, but may not be the best option. An amateur can easily create a Web site, but the site may not be attractive to experienced Internet users. In addition, the companies own the Web site name, or domain name, so the doctor has no control over the use of that name. Furthermore, companies offering free Web sites usually attach their own name to a site, making the whole site name overly long and difficult for patients to remember. Finally, the companies allow each site only limited space, making it hard for physicians to develop a mature, growing, in-depth, and versatile site.

Q: *An independent Web design company designed your Web site. How did that arrangement work out for you?*

A: The company offered to design a seven-page site for free if I used their site and paid a hosting fee. This type of arrangement is relatively common. I investigated the company and its references, including five or six hospitals and physician groups. Their sites were nicely done. I designed the site using the loose-leaf notebook, and then wrote the content using Microsoft Word. The Web designers then converted everything to HTML format, scanned the images, and did the programming.

Physicians have to be careful when working with a Web site design company. For example, as it turns out, seven pages were not sufficient for a physician

Web site. Accordingly, when I want to add additional pages to my site, I must pay a substantial cost. Currently, my site contains 15 or 20 pages, and it keeps growing. Unfortunately, despite our extensive reference checking, we still had other unexpected problems develop with the company.

I suggest that if physicians want to out-source their Web design, they should work with a local company, check the company’s references and visit its sites. They should look for a company that will design a site with interactive capabilities and the ability to link with other sites. Sometimes, physicians can find a student to help. They can contact their local business school, ask for the internship director, and tell him or her that they are interested in developing a Web site. The internship director may be able to find a student who can work on the project.

Q: *Do you have any other advice for physicians interested in developing their own sites?*

A: Physicians should remember that the best sites are dynamic, growing, flexible, versatile. Each one should be a work in progress. Therefore, physicians need to work at making their site useful, and need to budget time and financial resources to make it successful. In addition, the physician needs to take the lead. This would be true for any new initiative, whether it is a clinical or marketing program, regardless of whether it is big or small.

Also, a physician Web site should create a sense of fun for the community. For example, an ob-gyn can post pictures of babies. Contests and community events can be promoted as well. A site can be fun and exciting but still have a professional image. Make it professional, informative, lively, warm, interactive, useful, and make it a place where patients like to come to see what’s new in the practice of medicine. ■