



## marketing minute

---

**Doctor on the Web** Individuals, including your patients, are using the Internet more and more, particularly for health-care information. Don't be left behind by not having a Web site for your practice or having an outdated one.

---

BY JULIE K. SILVER, MD



In this age of information, most of us rely on Web sites for at least some of our information and even some of our shopping. Every couple of weeks I order groceries and clothes for my family on line. Last month I ordered my new computer on line, a casserole dish, and theater tickets. But do I need to have my own Web site for my medical practice?

Jim Cozzens, a part-time Web site designer whose wife is a physician, says there are two reasons why doctors should consider building a

Web site. First, to be seen by prospective patients and second, to communicate with current patients. Not only does Cozzens think that Web sites may be helpful for doctors, but not having a Web site may actually harm your reputation. He says, "In an age where even cereal boxes ask you to visit their Web sites, not having one may make a doctor appear out of step with the current tech-

nology, and who wants someone like that taking care of their health?"

Thomas Wong, the author of *101 Ways to Boost Your Web Traffic*, concurs with Cozzens, "I believe that all doctors should have their own personal Web sites. They can serve their patients much, much better." Wong estimates that "99 percent of medical groups, hospitals, and clinics in the United

States already have their Web sites in place." Wong's estimate may be somewhat high, particularly in certain areas of the country, but physicians' Web sites certainly are becoming more common. Even if you do already have a Web site, there are important points to consider, such as how you can improve your Web site, what information you should include in it, and how you can boost traffic to your Web site.

If you want to construct a new Web site or update an existing one, then you need to both find a good Web designer (if you don't have one) and decide what you

---

**"In an age where even cereal boxes ask you to visit their Web sites, not having one may make a doctor appear out of step with the current technology, and who wants someone like that taking care of their health?"**

---

*Continued*

want on the site or what modifications or additions you would like to make to it. Wong suggests looking at other medical Web sites to see how you can improve yours. He also recommends checking out Web sites geared for practicing physicians such as [www.doctorspage.net](http://www.doctorspage.net). In terms of finding a Web developer, Wong says, "That is the easy part. In fact, this is an excellent time because there are many hungry Web developers out there looking for work." Wong adds that they can be found by doing a search on the Internet. Other ways to find Web designers is to look at the Web sites that you think are particularly well done. They often list the developer's name. Friends and colleagues may be able to suggest someone as well. For whomever you choose, be sure to check out their previous work on the Web.

#### Content possibilities

In determining the information that your Web site provides, some basic business principles will work. Ralph Wilson, the author of *Planning Your Internet Marketing Strategy*, writes about assessing your "core competencies." What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats? (A SWOT analysis in business and marketing lingo.) What do you want to offer patients and potential clients? What information do they need? How could you use your Web site to make your practice run more efficiently? Wong suggests a laundry list of options including forms that can be filled out on line, a basic update of personal and insurance information, diagnosis-specific educational information, preventive medicine references, and referral suggestions. Other key information is office hours, location, directions, appropriate ways to contact the doctor and staff with questions, ad-

vice on how to get prescription refills, and so on.

Content that will personalize your practice and make it stand out as unique is very appealing as well. Cozzens recommends adding staff bios to "put a face on your practice." You can do some seasonal updates such as relevant medical information for the allergy season, flu shot information in the fall and winter, back-to-school physical examination information for the late summer and fall, and so on. If you or other physicians in your practice are involved in the community or participate in organizations such as the Special Olympics or the American Red Cross, then you can post information about this on the site. Any awards, recognition, or achievements are great to build into the site. These include peer recognition awards, hospital or medical association committees you are on, and newspaper or other media coverage of things relevant to your practice. Even if you don't have an article that is directly about your practice, you can post a recent article that has been in the news with your own headings above it reading, "Dr. X agrees with the new recommendations to immunize all school children against chicken pox." You can also post information about special equipment or tests that you provide in your office. New technology and updates to your practice—both equipment and staff knowledge—are very appealing to patients and make them feel as though their doctors are really up to date.

#### Cost considerations

The content and special features really drive the price of the Web site construction. When we asked several companies for bids to construct and maintain our practice's Web site, we got a huge range in prices. The construction prices ranged from \$5,000 to

30,000, and the maintenance, though much less, varied almost as much and depended on how often the site would need updating. Thomas Wong concurs that Web design work can have a wide range. In his experience, a Web site can be constructed for \$2,000 to 3,000. Wong notes that where he works (in Silicon Valley), Web developers are much more available and thus the price is probably significantly lower than in other parts of the country. Many Web developers will work on an hourly basis and update your site periodically. Again, rates vary, but in the range of \$30 to 50 per hour are typical. There are a few other costs to consider, such as domain name registration, but these generally add up to just a few hundred dollars at most.

Once you have determined its content, chosen a developer, and constructed a Web site, you still have some work to do. In fact, this post-design phase is likely the most important part. If you build a Web site and no one uses it, this is akin to having a lavish party where no one shows up. You need to "direct Web traffic" to your site. This is where Wong is really an expert. He notes that what works for one doctor may not work for another. But at a minimum, doctors can direct users to their site by getting listed in medical group directories—both in print and on the Web. Physicians can also set up referral tools such as a newsletter that lists the Web address. Printing the Web address on all business cards, appointment cards, and letterhead helps to let computer-savvy people know how to learn more about you and your practice. Obviously letting existing patients know about the Web site is critical as well.

Keep in mind that directing people to your Web site is mostly about letting

them know that it exists and making sure that when they do log on, they find useful information that helps them. So, although search engines may be helpful, you may not want just anyone logging onto your site. If that is the case, then you have to get your target audience the information they need to access the site. However, if you anticipate that people will go to your site via a search engine, then it is important to consider what keywords you want to use to lead people to your site and also which search engines to register with. There are thousands of search engines, but it is not necessary to be listed in all of them. Wong lists the major search engines in his book and suggests that readers go to [www.searchenginewatch.com](http://www.searchenginewatch.com) for more information.

Wong notes that the biggest mistake people make regarding Web site promotion is that they “think they can rely entirely on someone else to do Web promotion for them. I think that all doctors understand the need to do diagnostics before prescribing any medication. It is the same for Web site promotion. They must be involved in the process.”

If you are ready to take the leap and develop a Web site for your practice, then Wong offers the following advice, “Quality contents, interactivity, and user-friendliness are all important qualities. But most importantly, you need to listen to the needs of your patients.” ■

*Julie K. Silver, MD is an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and the medical director of one of Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital's outpatient centers. Dr. Silver has written/edited several books including [The Business of Medicine](#) and [Essentials of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation](#) (Hanley & Belfus, Inc.).*

#### Web Site Design Resources

Jim Cozzens  
[www.cozzens.net](http://www.cozzens.net)

Thomas Wong  
[www.intesync.com](http://www.intesync.com)