

The Internet for Dentists

ISSUES TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING A WEB SITE

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Many dentists have already created their own Web site to enhance their communication with the outside world. A Web site gives you the opportunity to advertise exactly what your office has to offer and to respond to the needs and interests of patients. Web sites are a great way to make use of the Internet as a communications tool. For some dentists, a Web site is merely a collection of pages with text, graphics, and video that allow the public to view their office. For others, it allows them to expand their services through e-commerce transactions (credit card payments), voice communication, and even patient bookings. Before creating a Web site for your dental office, you should consider a number of issues.

Planning

Planning can save you a lot of money, time, and aggravation. Start by studying how other successful dental Web sites work — there may be a style on the Internet that meets the needs of your office. If you go to an Internet search engine (e.g., www.altavista.com) and type the word “dentist,” you will find many sites that have been developed specifically by dentists. You will undoubtedly like some and detest others. The main goal is to pick a look that is professional and functional. Take the time to note how the information

layout makes the site interesting and useful.

Before going any further, you need to answer some basic questions. For example, who will the information be targeted to? Do you want to include some pictures of your dental work? What are the advertising regulations in your jurisdiction? Once you have addressed these concerns, you can map out the flow of information. Take a piece of paper and write down the content of each page. Tape the pages on the wall in a pyramid shape and have a look at the way your viewer must travel through the information. (It is useful to think of the site as a pyramid with tunnels leading to different chambers within the pyramid.) Some areas of the Web site will have longer tunnels and will require more thought.

Take some time to think of a name for your Web site (domain name) that will be easy for people to remember. Once you have an idea, check if the domain name has already been taken by going to sites like www.register.com and www.supersavedomains.com. For a fee, these sites also allow you to reserve domain names, usually for 2 years. When you choose a domain name, pick a name that makes sense to your patients so it will be easier for them to find you on the Internet.

Graphic Design

Once you have planned the basic content of the Web site, enlist the help of a graphic designer. The success of your site can hinge on the look and function of your pages. The graphic files should be fairly small so that viewers do not have to wait too long for the images to travel over the Internet. The size of the file is determined by the way it is formatted. Most Web designers like to use JPEG and GIF files for faster downloading.

Navigation graphics are very useful on a Web site. It is nice if there is some continuity to help viewers make the transition from one page to the next.

Each page should have buttons (links) that take the viewer into specific areas of the site. It is essential to have a “return to home page” button. For most sites, the home page works like a table of contents in a book. If you are visiting a good site, the home page should direct you to different levels of information. Without a table of contents to help them get around, viewers can get frustrated and leave the site.

Maintenance

Maintaining your site is crucial, especially if it contains links to other sites. The Internet is rapidly changing and Web sites do become obsolete. Avoid causing your visitors needless frustration. Also update your information regularly. Visitors are more likely to return if you are constantly changing the information and pictures on your site.

Marketing

Once the Web site is fully functional, it is important to consider a marketing plan to let your potential visitors know how to find the site. You can list your Web address on business cards, letterhead, magnets, pencils, and toothbrushes. If you use e-mail you can list your Web site in the “signature file” area so that patients can automatically click on the address and go directly to the site.

It is also important to submit your Web site to Internet search engines. These engines will ask for various description words that people would use to find you. Ask your patients for their suggestions — after all, they are the ones who will be looking for you on the Internet.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or official policies of the Canadian Dental Association.
