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by Chris Wilson

Imagine someone searching the newspaper for your hospital's advertisement. Or flipping through the TV channels seeking your hospital's commercial. That's basically what happens when someone visits our web site. The Internet has become one of the most valuable marketing tools we have, because everyone who visits our site wants to be there.

More than 33 million adults will log onto the Internet to search for health information this year. Forty percent of Internet searches are health-related. Americans are hungry for health information, especially when it involves a diagnosis of cancer for themselves or a loved one. Eighteen percent of health-related searches are cancer specific.¹ Many of these searches are performed by individuals who feel they have lost control of their own health. Information gives back some of that control. In fact, Princeton Survey Research Associates maintains that 67 percent of doctors say patients come to them with information found on the Internet.

About two years ago, in the midst of the Internet explosion, leaders at Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia, Pa., had a vision: provide people with easy access to cancer information. We understood the importance of establishing a presence on the Internet, because our patients and their families want more informa-

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tion. And our patients come first.

Our web site was originally designed for patients, their families, doctors, employees, and any other people looking for information about cancer. We started with basic patient information and ended up with a physician directory. But we didn't stop there. We have continued to build the site with three basic elements at its core: development, maintenance, and promotion.

In developing our web site, we initially had to 1) identify our audience, 2) choose the appropriate information we wished displayed, and 3) decide who would maintain the site.

Today, there are thousands of health-related web sites. Users have no way of knowing which sites are credible and which are not. Our basic premise was that Fox Chase's site must be unique. To be a valuable resource, we must provide visitors with accurate and updated information.

Fox Chase's site was developed with a diverse audience in mind. The media can check our site for news releases. Patients can log on for information on specific cancer diagnoses, such as breast, lung, or prostate cancers. Physicians can access a list of clinical trials. Scientists may browse our scientific reports. Patients can view a photograph of their oncologist, read the physician's biography, and locate his or her telephone number through our physician directory. Students can learn about sarcomas. Families can download maps and directions. General practitioners can learn how to refer a patient. Anyone can look for a job.

Visitors to the Fox Chase site are eager to find specific information quickly. Therefore, we make it easy for them to find what they are

looking for. As a result, the site was designed to be simple. Too many fancy graphics take too long to download.

Fox Chase's web site is a result of multidisciplinary teamwork. As a nonprofit institution, we were not in a position to hire outside consultants to develop and create additional sections of our site. Instead, we depend on our staff to build and maintain the site. We did not hire a web design firm to develop, maintain, and promote our web site. Instead, Fox Chase Cancer Center's information service and marketing department staff developed and maintains the site. The key to this cooperative effort has been a commitment from hospital executives to stand behind our web site. As long as we have their support, our staff can pitch in and make it work.

Is our web site perfect? No. Web sites are constantly evolving projects. They will never really be "finished," but rather remain works in progress. That is the beauty of the Internet. Mistakes are remedied immediately and new programs can be added on the spot.

Looking ahead to the future, we are planning to make our web site more interactive, publish newsletters on-line, and build a physician referral service. We also want to make navigation of the site even easier for our visitors.

The challenge remains. Keep it fresh. Keep people coming back for more. ■

REFERENCE

¹Walsh M. Healthcare: The Next Frontier. Presented at the 1999 Annual Meeting of the House of Delegates of the American Medical Association. New York, N.Y., June 24, 1999.