Launching Your Oncology Practice Web Site

by Ricky Lark, Ph.D., April Young, Janice J. Fore, and Jivesh Sharma, M.D.

Slow information transfer has plagued the health care system for years. Through the Internet, however, the potential finally exists to unite health care providers with patients, insurers, and suppliers in a seamless virtual system that allows information to be relayed at ever-increasing speeds.

The results of a recent Harris Interactive Survey found that nearly 100 million adults, or 75 percent of all adults online, use the Internet to find health care information and resources. The average adult looks for health care information more than three times a month, typically through search engines and portals rather than by going directly to a web site. Heavy Internet users (those who were online eight or more hours a week) looked for health-related information an average of six times a month. All these web browsers are potential visitors to your practice web site.

YOU HAVE A WEB SITE... SO WHAT

A few years ago, most practice web sites were what are now called "brochure sites." They provided a simple narrative of the services a practice performed, office hours, and policies, and usually included a map and directions.

The new interactive web sites allow patients to make appointments, request prescription refills, and obtain lab results online instead of handling these tasks with phone calls or personal visits. They are transforming patients' relationships with the medical office and easing the burdens of the office staff.

New patients can fill out their initial paperwork at home and send it to a secure database where it is stored until the office staff is ready to download it into the practice management software or print it out for the patient's paper chart. Patients can also create online accounts to obtain blood test results, find answers to billing questions, view their account information (including staff member notes) to answer questions posed by insurers denying benefits, request drug refills and medical records, check pre- and postoperative recommendations, and schedule tests.

New systems can also automatically deliver messages and supplemental materials to patients about their diagnosis and send them e-mails when they are due for ongoing screening tests.

Since patients will not use a virtual office site unless they know their privacy is being protected, security must be a top priority.

A good way to work responsibly with sensitive data on the Internet is to use encryption and products with a proven track record in security issues. Web development companies have security specialists who will help you choose the security products that are best for your practice.

IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

To reach people, you'll need to submit your web site to as many search engines as possible, and you'll need to know the rules and techniques for maximum exposure in each search engine. Unfortunately, search engines use different criteria and widely different formulae in their ranking routines. Several even sell the top rankings to companies with large advertising budgets. Again, engaging the services of a web design firm for this step is a good idea.

With millions of web sites available, it will probably take a number of months before your site is even added to a search engine's database. You can, however, speed up the process...for a price. Some search engines charge $99 to list your site within several weeks, and $199 to list it within two days. You can contact each search engine directly, or work with a search engine marketing company that will do the work for you.

If you choose not to pay, it can now take 10 or 12 months for a new site to appear in the search engine's results. It used to take only three months.

When a patient types "cancer" into a search engine such as at

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Yahoo! or Google, the engine uses sophisticated algorithms to rank web sites in their search results. Sometimes only the first 100 choices will be listed. The first places usually go to large organizations such as the National Cancer Institute or patient advocacy groups rather than individual practice web sites.

To increase the odds of your web site being listed higher in a search engine's results, use words and phrases in your text or titles that match what you think web surfers might type in. Using a single word such as "cancer" will not get you listed up front since there are too many competing sites that use this keyword. A better choice is a phrase such as "cancer doctor in Philadelphia," "cancer therapy in Philadelphia," or "cancer treatment in East Pennsylvania" (see "Web Sites 101" on page 19).

An interactive web site will enable your practice to collect and process an enormous amount of patient information via the Internet, improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of the care you provide and improving your office staff's quality of life as well. A well-designed site will attract new patients and increase the satisfaction of the patients you already have. It is the ideal way to build true lifelong relationships with those you serve. 🐚

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