

WEB SITES 101

by Mary K. Pedigo, CPA, CTT

The Internet is a worldwide network of computers, and the *World Wide Web* is a network of information resources. The Web relies on three mechanisms to make these resources available:

- A *uniform naming scheme* for each web site (e.g., URIs, or Uniform Resource Identifiers, which include URLs or Uniform Resource Locators). Each web site has a unique name followed by .com, .net, or .org, among other possible suffixes.

- *HTML*, or HyperText Markup Language, is the actual coding that creates a web page. HTML allows authors to re-create many of the components found in hardcopy documents, such as headings, paragraphs, and tables, and allows other types of media, such as graphics, audio, and video, to be embedded directly into the file. Coding in HTML also allows one web page to link to an infinite number of other web pages.

- *Protocols*, such as HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol), are languages spoken between the web browser in your computer and a web server on the Internet. They allow your computer to communicate and exchange files with the Internet. Unless you are a web programmer, you won't need to deal with them.

Web browsers are software programs that read and interpret the HTML codes used to build the pages. Two of the most well-

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known browsers are Netscape Navigator[®] and Microsoft Internet Explorer[®].

DOMAIN NAMES

The Domain Name System (DNS) helps users to find their way around the Internet. Every computer on the Internet has a unique address that consists of a complicated string of numbers called its "IP address." The DNS makes using the Internet easier by allowing a familiar string of letters (the domain name) to be used instead of the all-number IP address; so, for example, instead of typing 207.151.159.3, you can type *www.internic.net*, although both will take you to the same web site.

When you register a domain name, you are making an entry in a directory of all the domain names and their corresponding computers on the Internet. Domain names ending with .biz, .com, .info, .name, .net, or .org can be registered through competing companies (known as "registrars"). A list of these companies appears in the Accredited Registrar Directory on the InterNIC web site at <http://www.internic.net/regist.html>. The registrar will submit your contact and technical information to a central directory known as the "registry," which gives other computers on the Internet the information they need to send you e-mail or to find your web site.

The choice of your domain name is very important. It should contain well-known words that are easily spelled and do not contain illegal characters such as spaces, %, \$, !, *, and \$, among others. You can seek advice from an experienced web design company, or try your own domain name ideas by using <http://www.internic.net/whois.html>. An error will appear if you enter illegal characters, and you'll learn whether your desired domain name is already in use and therefore not available.

META TAGS

A meta tag is a special set of words or phrases contained in the HTML coding of your site. Meta tags, which are not visible to web site readers, serve to alert most search

engines about the content of your site. There are "keyword" meta tags and "description" meta tags.

Keyword meta tags. Most major search engines use keywords (such as oncology, cancer program, or Ohio oncology practice) to index a web site in their database. Web sites with keyword meta tags are likely to appear on search engine lists in rank order before sites without keywords, even if the content is the same. Choosing the right keywords is important in publicizing your site.

Amateur mistakes in choosing keyword meta tags can have serious consequences. For example, some search engines accept only a certain number of keywords and will ignore them all if too many words are used.

Description Meta Tags.

Description meta tags are one or two sentences that describe your site for the search engine's web site list. If no description meta tags are available, some search engines will display part of the first paragraph from the web page after the site name. Since the web site description can powerfully influence which web sites people visit, write it with your reader in mind.

FINDING HELP

Start small, then add more to your web site as you grow.

If you want a "brochure site" that presents only hours, policies, and other descriptive information about your practice, you can probably design it yourself with a little professional help on graphics. Buy a good software program for building web pages such as Macromedia Dreamweaver[®], Microsoft FrontPage[®], NetObjects Fusion[®], HomeSite[®], HotMetal Pro[®], and Web Weaver Gold[®].

An interactive site requires multiple data sources and delivery systems with transmission security. This level of expertise is beyond most medical offices and even many web design firms. Since bad planning results in added costs, you should definitely engage a professional firm that specializes in interactive sites if there is an interactive web site in your future. ☐