Using the Web to Market Your Practice

Robert T. Smithing, MSN, NP

September 2001

Objectives

1. Participants will be able to identify a means of promoting their practice using the Internet.

Class Notes

This early bird session is a rapid overview of some of the issues involved in marketing your practice using the Internet.

How Do People Look for Health Information On-line?

There are some key differences between consumers using the Internet in general and those using it to locate health related information. According to an article in ATSP Online *"unlike consumers seeking other information online, patients don't explore health topics on the Web at their leisure or for entertainment. In fact, the vast majority–77 percent–use the Internet for health issues only when they have specific questions."* While Internet users may go directly to www.amazon.com and make a purchase they generally do not go directly to health related sites when looking for information about health issues. *"To answer their health queries on the Web, 65 percent of patients usually start with general search engines such as Yahoo, Ask Jeeves, and Alta Vista. Only 24 percent make health portals such as WebMD and InteliHealth their first stop; a mere 11 percent start with disease-specific Web sites such as Oncology.com or MSWatch. And even those who favor specific health-related sites report that they initially found them through general search engines."* [1,2]

Search Engines

Search engines appear to be simple and straightforward, they are, just like the diagnosis of someone with fatigue. Getting top positioning in a search engine is something that can be very difficult to do. For practices, linkages with sites that are listed in the search engines, using your web address in all your marketing materials and telling your patients about your web site is probably your best bet. Most practices draw patients from a local area and may find the effort to get into search engines a greater cost than benefit. Of course, if you have lots of time, and a technogeek bent search engines can be fun.

Billboards of the Web

One way to think of the Internet is as a great highway. You can place a billboard on this byway in cyberspace. Much like a billboard on any highway, those who cruise the Internet will find web pages providing information for their review. Unlike concrete highways, the billboards in cyberspace can contain significant amounts of information for the reader as you can stop and tarry at a web site that interests you. The reader can also

mark the site so that they can come back and visit it in the future.

A billboard on the Internet is generally a small web site that gives basic information about your practice. The key questions to be answered are: Who, what, when and where. It's a single basic message, similar to an ad in the phone directory or a highway billboard. It is however much easier to keep up-to-date and less expensive.

On-line Brochure

Think of a web site as an on-line brochure. One that has virtually unlimited space and is easy to update.

Some examples:
- www.npclinics.com/fc/wa/kent
- www.debbiedonovanpnp.com
- http://hchc.salu.net/

You can provide a one page, basic description of your practice with contact information, or use it as a patient resource for your handouts and other information. However, remember two key points; make it simple and quick to locate information and don't overuse graphics. Large graphics, or many smaller ones, increase the time it takes for your web site to be downloaded. Web sites that take too long to download don't get viewed!

Link with Existing Marketing

Put your web address, www.yourpractice.com on all of your marketing materials. People will be able to find out additional information about you and you will be able to keep the material current.

Generally, other than having to update the information in several different places, there would be no disadvantages to listing in multiple on-line directories. When you do, it is helpful to include a link to your practice website where you can provide additional information about your practice.

Directories work if consumers, and others who may refer to you, know where they are and find them easy to use. They should also have incoming links from different sites to help bring consumers and referrers into the site. The chief disadvantage of multiple, focal, directories is that it takes additional time for you to be located. When available a listing is a larger national directory, especially if it is well known, is advantageous. This can be especially so if an out-of-area clinician is trying to locate a nurse practitioner for a family member or patient who is moving. For nurse practitioners the ability to be found is very real, we seem to be the best kept secret in health care today. The executive director of a national nurse practitioner specialty had trouble in locating a nurse practitioner for care when moving. Imagine the problems consumers have in finding a nurse practitioner for care.

Focal On-line Directories

There are a number of focal on-line directories springing up across the Internet. Some of these are regionally or state based, some are for members of an organization, and some are specialty specific.

Specialty specific site examples:
- www.salu.net/
- www.acnm.org

Organization specific site example:
- www.acnm.org

Regional site example:
- http://aznpconnection.netfirms.com/aznpdir.htm

The chief disadvantage of all the focal sites is the time it takes to locate them and search them. With limited hours in the day and much to be done it is difficult to spend the time.

Insurance Directories On-line

This is free publicity for your practice; insurance companies have published their provider directories on-line. However, you have to check to be certain that you are listed, and listed properly. Generally, they have only provided the same basic information for all providers listed. At some point email and web addresses are likely to be added. Check your listing, and those of surrounding practices, regularly and update your listing as appropriate. It has been the experience of our practice that consumers do use these insurance directories when looking for a new provider.

National On-line Directories

A single national resource overcomes the limitations of multiple smaller directories. One location to remember and search.

The *National Nurse Practitioner Directory* (www.npclinics.com) is currently the only national directory for nurse practitioners, which has, as it's sole requirement for listing that you be a nurse practitioner. All specialties and geographic locations are welcome. Listings are searchable by clinician or practice name, city, state or zip code, and specialty. Listings can include a link to your practice website and a link to your picture. (Pictures help to increase the marketability of your practice, as consumers like to know what you look like.) The listing can be updated at any time. A one-year listing costs $25. Linkages from consumer and nurse practitioner sites are being developed. New links are welcome. Nurse practitioners can join either on-line or print any application by going to www.npclinics.com.[3]

Put Your Handouts On-line

Either putting your handouts on your web site, or linking from

your site to a page of reviewed handouts is an effective means of making your practice handouts available to patients. Plus, it saves you time in clinic. Rather than trying to get a handout from your file cabinet, or desk, or brief case, or where ever you left the pesky thing, you give the address of your web site to your patient. They can easily get a copy of the handout you want them to have and if they lose it, a copy is a few clicks away. Your practice does not have the expense of keeping multiple copies of handouts on-site and storing them. They can be quickly updated when needed and if patients don't have easy access to the Internet you can print a copy from your office computer before they leave. Additionally, there is the development time you save by not having to write all of your handouts.

Encourage your patients to tell their friends and family about your collection of handouts. Visitors to your site may decide they like your style of care and join your practice.

Getting Folks to Visit Your Internet Site

Build it and they will come… but you have to tell them where to find it. Put your web site address on your business cards, in your advertisements, on your brochure and anywhere else you can think of. When patients come into the office tell them what your web address is and invite them to visit your site.

Internet Yellow Pages

There are a variety of "Yellow Pages" available on the Internet. To get placed at the top of the listings where you may be seen can become quite expensive. You can have links to your practice web site, a link to a map, logos and other "bells & whistles" the publisher would be happy to sell you. With a business listing in a printed local phone directory you or your practice may get a basic on-line listing as well.

Will this work for your practice? It depends, so be sure to ask where folks found out about your practice. If you're getting new patients from this source it works and you should continue it. If not, cancel it.

Additional Information

Please ask any questions you may have during the session. If unable to attend the session or if questions come up later you can contact the speaker at his office, which is listed below. You can also talk with him through out the conference.

---

[1] ATSP Online [add volume, date and URL]

[2] Harris Interactive Health Care News, Issue 21, http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_healthcare.asp

[3] The speaker has a financial interest in this project.