



Websites Need to Work

Is your website poor, good, or great?

By James Geyer, MD and Paul Cox



It seems as if everyone has a website, and in reality, there are few practices that do not have a website at all. Today, during the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, it is more important

than ever for your patients to have multiple ways of getting information from your practice. Your website is among the most important of these because it can function for you even when there is no one available to answer the phone.

Many practices have a simple website. A few have a well-designed website with a number of features. It is the rare group that has a professionally designed user-friendly site that provides useful information, helps improve the practice workflow, and enhances care. Even in these rare cases, additional novel services can be integrated into the website to optimize particular aspects of the practice, such as alerting patients to a change in scheduling practices or waiting-room policy during a pandemic. As with every aspect of medical care and business management, the practice's web presence should be monitored and improved on a regular basis. You should also have a plan for how to update your website when the situation in your community is changing rapidly.

Why Do I Need a Website?

A website provides a simple platform to provide the basic information about your practice. Effective websites integrate practice branding, marketing, and patient engagement and education with a user experience that brings people back to the website repeatedly. An effective site also provides a pathway to the patient portal and other care services. The quality of the website depends on the content and the presentation. Pay attention to both. Used wisely, a great website can enhance care, recruit patients, and improve productivity. Your website is a reflection of the practice and all the physicians and staff within it. Do you want to have the appearance and reputation of a highly professional practice providing the best care and service possible? Your website needs to reflect this.

The Poor Website

The basic information is very important and should be on the landing page or splash page—including hours of opera-

tion, contact numbers, location, and maybe even a map—but it is a poor web site that includes only this information. There may also be pictures of the staff and even some background biographical and historical data. There is some information but little marketing or information to engage existing or potential patients. A website with only these elements is little more than a simple informational posting—a poor site giving the equivalent of name, rank, and serial number. A poor website may work but it certainly does not convey the professional image the practice deserves.

These sites typically have simple graphics and awkward interfaces and are difficult to navigate. Despite these limitations, a practice may have paid a significant amount for web design services. Unfortunately, the negative advertising associated with a poor site has other costs, including irritated patients and caregivers, lost potential patients, less-efficient use of clinic time, and negative on-line reviews. A poorly designed website is also a cybersecurity risk.

Why take the chance? Just like everything surrounding your practice, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well.

The Good Website

The good website contains the basic information included on the poor site. The better the site the more effectively this information is displayed. In addition to the basic information, there is more detail about the physicians' training and interests to instill confidence, some marketing information, and links to social media sites. These sites also usually have some educational content or links to educational sites. Many also have some of the office forms available for people to fill out prior to a visit. Even a simple landing page website can host a portal to the electronic health record (EHR) system.

The Great Website

A great website builds on the features of a good site and also delivers superior content with an outstanding user experience. A deluxe website starts with user-friendly intuitive design and navigation and robust content and functionality. The educational content is designed and organized to improve care and expedite patient interactions.

A great website is not filled with clever gimmicks or eye-candy (eg, animations, calculators, or puzzles). In fact, gim-



micks and parlor tricks detract from the functionality of a website. Don't fall for these often quite expensive features, which contribute to slow load times and increased risk of freezing, especially when viewed on a mobile device.

Great Website Design

Great website design consists of many small but extremely important components. See www.neurologysleepmedicine.com for an example. Begin with the layout and look of the site, which must be intuitive and streamlined. Clutter yields confusion. Fonts and color combinations are also important and should remain simple (2 to 3 font choices and 3 to 4 color choices) and easily seen and read on any screen in the sunlight. The site must be as powerful and legible in grayscale as in color. These issues are of vital importance but are frequently misunderstood. Cute and different may be used as selling points, but are more apt to yield frustration and trouble.

The layout of the site should be easily followed. Navigation (the way a user will move through the site with menus and clickable elements) should be a breeze even for the technology novice. An impressive website is one that works. A great deal of thought should go into the button placement and the fields being opened. Clicks must be limited. The longer something takes, the more frustrated the user becomes. Given the power of current technology, people expect to find what they need in seconds, not minutes. If patients and potential patients don't find what they are looking for, they most likely won't come back. This is a lost opportunity to engage and further build a relationship with that individual.

Great Website Content

The Basics. Your website needs several types of content. First, the basic facts about the practice should be immediately obvious, including a description of services, staff, hours of operation, location, directions, and a map. A photo of the building is helpful. Staff names, when clicked should lead to a page providing additional information about each person that personalizes the website interaction. This can also provide a marketing edge by featuring education, training, research, special interests, awards, and social media for each member of the practice. Testimonials and positive reviews and rankings are another useful marketing tactic and should be on the home page or listed as a link on the home page.

Interesting and informative background can drive views and should still remain simple; don't add fluff. Gimmicky videos are a waste of time; whereas videos with purpose and value (eg, how a procedure is done in simple terms) will also drive usage and appearances in search engine results. Everything on the site should be value added. Photographs can send a powerful message. Just make sure that it is a positive message. Use as much care with the words and images

as you would use when writing a prescription.

Education. Use your website to provide links to your own and outside educational sources, the latter of which make your site more likely to appear in search-engine results. Review all links regularly to make sure addresses have not changed. Failure messages are annoying and limit usefulness of your site, making people less likely to return. Your own informational and educational content adds to the authority and perceived expertise of the practice. Always make sure that the content added is correct, both factually and grammatically. Failure on either front will backfire.

Aim content to multiple audiences, from existing to potential patients with different levels of health care knowledge and needs. You don't have to limit the educational content to patients; links and content other physicians and practices are an excellent resource adding to your marketing and referral efforts with minimal cost.

Internal Uses. A portion of the site can be limited to internal office use and bookmark all the pertinent links, host frequently used forms and documents. Such an intranet provides rapid access to multiple platforms, services, and other resources without the need for complex internal folder systems. This increases practice efficiency because everything can be arranged for ease of use and files can be accessed without the need to directly accessing office systems. This repository of data optimizes patient care. Every minute spent searching for a form or a piece of information is a minute lost—that can be regained with a well-organized highly functional website.

Great Website Functionality

A great web presence is much more than a well-designed website with great content, however. Your website needs to function as a communications center integrating social media accounts and the ability to contact the practice in a meaningful way (whether through a portal or the ability to e-mail the right person for a particular question or issue). The system should be built so that information is managed in a central account and produces the sought-after buzz and information stream. Managing Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media accounts, though a central hub helps create a powerful social media presence with limited effort.

Outstanding websites are interactive experiences that optimize relationships with patients, referring physicians, outside institutions, and even those within the practice.

The Future—Some of It—Is Now

Additional web features and integrated external services will help create an even more powerful online tool. Enhanced user interfaces and user experiences can be deployed now. New technologies are emerging for how people interact with computers, including virtual reality

(VR), augmented reality (AR), and voice assistants. There is a growing body of evidence that telemedicine visits can be as, or more, effective as in person visits for certain conditions and types of visits, and telemedicine capability is becoming even more essential with social distancing—that is unlikely to go away, even after the pandemic does. Voice technologies are growing at a rapid pace with smart speakers and voice recognition available in cars and homes alike. These new technologies provide a new and easier approach both acquire and receive information. New methods are being developed to improve the ease of navigation and expand the options available to users. Your website should be updated on a regular basis to leverage these features. A static site will rapidly become stale.

Numerous web services (eg, artificial intelligence, enhanced search tools, chatbot support, disease management tools, and telemedicine services) can be integrated into the site or seamlessly linked to it.

New and advanced home monitoring systems create a deluge of data, much of which is not effectively managed or even reviewed. Future use of websites to guide data collection and assist in data processing may create solutions that leverage this data to enhance care.

Integrated communications systems will expand beyond websites, linking users to secure communication with the practice. These features will require HIPAA compliance and significant security features. Although such features can be complicated and associated with an added expense, these can also create a much more efficient user experience for patient, physician, and staff alike, when designed with all users and stakeholders needs and experience in mind.

Best Website Practices

Numerous adjunctive services and capabilities are being developed. Some may be helpful, others little more than bells and whistles. Wise use of technology enhances your practice. Beware of hidden costs, technology overload, and increased workload. Most importantly, develop a web presence that enhances your practice, impresses your patients, and decreases your workload. ■

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