

Doctor's Digest Podcast: Marketing for the Primary Care Physician "Marketing your Practice Online"

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Hello and welcome to this new series of podcasts brought to you by the publishers of *Doctor's Digest*, bridging the gap between the business of medicine and the practice of medicine, with single-topic manuals that provide practical solutions from the experts. Support for this program comes from McNeil Pediatrics, division of Ortho-McNeil-Janssen Pharmaceuticals.

It's not easy to stay on top of online trends: What's hot today may shift quickly in the fast-moving world of technology. But there is one bottom line that you can ignore only at your own peril: the fact that every medical professional should have a Website. One reason is that the Web is where your patients are going for healthcare information. In fact, nearly half of Internet users turn to the Web for information about doctors or other health professionals, according to a new study by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. This December 2008 study was based on interviews with 2,253 adults about the social impact of the Internet on healthcare.

Among other things, the study found that 37% of adults seeking information about doctors checked out online physician rating sites. This may not be good news, as the physician rating sites may be saying unfair or inaccurate things about you and your practice. The good news about them is that, at least so far, these sites are not very influential. A Harris Interactive poll showed that while nearly a quarter of Internet users who seek healthcare information looked at physician ratings, the ratings influenced only 2% of them to make a change. The bad news is that, if one of these sites does contain disturbing or inaccurate information, you may find it hard to get it changed.

Clearly the best way to make sure that the online information about your practice is accurate is to have your own Website. You can set it up yourself or use a consultant, who can cost between \$750 and \$5,000. Or you can use a service like CheckMD, which uses a standard physician template that can function as a de facto Website for your practice.

Whichever way you create it, your practice Website should be a visual representation of your brand "look" as well as your practice's personality. You may choose to include only the basics—physician biographies, testimonials, frequently asked questions, driving directions, practice specialty areas, and contact information. But more and more practices are adding information and forms to their Websites to streamline their process of dealing with new patients.

For example, Olio Road Family Care in Fishers, Ind., provides patient registration and other forms on its Website in a downloadable PDF format. Patients simply print out the forms at home, fill them in, and bring them along to their next appointment. Some sites allow patients to schedule their appointments online; others include a statement of the practice's policies and procedures, including how to contact the doctor after hours. Many sites go even further and offer interactive tools like quizzes to help patients assess their disease risk, information to help them make healthy lifestyle choices, and diet-and-exercise resources to help them monitor their progress on fitness plans.

Increasing numbers of doctors are using videos and podcasts—like this one—on their

Websites to communicate information to their patients on specific medical topics like swine flu and osteoporosis.

No matter how detailed or sophisticated your Website is, make sure it can easily be found through search engine optimization, or SEO, a strategy that helps consumers find the site when they use search engines like Google or Yahoo. Your consultant can quickly show you how to plant key words into your Website that will match the words prospective patients use when looking for medical services.

Once your Website is operational, get the word out. In addition to putting your Web address on your business cards and stationery, be sure to mention it in your online biography at other sites, such as hospitals, universities, or specialty societies. Register with specialized consumer medical information sites, such as www.SpineUniverse.com, and complete the physician profile form, which includes an opportunity to feature your practice's Web address. The practice of medicine must change with the changing times; and by harnessing the power of the Internet in marketing your primary care practice, you will have taken a giant step in the right direction.

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