

By Dr Tan Yung Ming

Practical Tips for Creating your Website – What They Do Not Teach You at Medical School



The internet is becoming part of our everyday lives. We use it to communicate with people across the country or around the globe; we use it to search for all kinds of information, reserve our air tickets, buy books and do our banking. And to do all these, we 'visit' or 'surf' numerous websites which are essentially manifestations of this virtual internet world.

So should doctors have anything to do with the internet? Should we build websites at all for our practices?

WHAT CAN A WEBSITE DO FOR MY PATIENTS OR MY PRACTICE?

Through the years, a lot of smart doctors have already asked themselves this question. And many of them have gone on to use the internet in many wonderful ways. Doctors and patients alike can now find the latest cutting edge information literally at their fingertips.

Many practices have found tangible benefits in having internet websites. A web presence can complement your practice in many ways, such as:

-  Reach out to more patients – An internet presence can help give web-savvy people relevant information like your services, opening and closing times, location and contact numbers. Relative to other forms of media, websites are relatively cheap to maintain 24/7 and are accessible to all around the world with an internet connection.
-  Educate your patients – Your website can contain important health messages you wish to share with your patients. You can even have an opt-in mailing list for those interested to receive periodic educational newsletters via email. More advanced websites can conduct interactive multimedia health education.
-  Improve patient-doctor communication – Email usage is pervasive and some doctors are already communicating with

their regular patients through this medium. Prudent documentation, however, is still essential due to medico-legal implications. Used appropriately, email consults can reduce unnecessary patient visits to the clinic or hospital, and improve patient-doctor communication. National Skin Centre has such a service for their regular patients. A future extension of email will be video conferencing and tele-medicine which may not be too far away.

IS THERE REALLY A DEMAND FOR MEDICAL WEBSITES?

The answer is a big yes. In the IDA annual survey (2005) of 2,000 households and 2,000 individuals, interesting trends were observed:

-  The proportion of households with access to a computer at home was 74%, which is one of the highest in the world.
-  61% (two in three residents) of Singapore's resident population aged 15 years and above were internet users.
-  89% of these internet users used the internet to search for information and 34% specifically used it to search for information related to health or health services.

This figure will only grow as more people come to see the internet as part of their lives. As technology matures, costs will go down, making computers and internet access more ubiquitous.

SO HOW DO I CREATE A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE?

For those thinking of setting up a website or those who already have one, this article hopes to share some tips on how to better reach your intended audience or patients.

To start off, two essential things must be defined:

1. Your target audience, that is, your patients: What are their demographics, needs, wants and most



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importantly, their main age group? A website is not useful for an elderly patient population.

2. The primary purpose of your website: Is it for display of operational information like clinic services, location, contact, or for patient education as well? Will there be interactive components? Be very clear about what you want to achieve and build only what you need. If you are hiring an external web designer, a clear sense of purpose will help him or her build your website, keeping well within the budget and timelines.

FIVE CRITICAL STEPS IN THE CREATION OF A WEBSITE

Step One: Choosing and registering a website's name or URL

This is a very important step. A URL (Universal Resource Locator) is the internet equivalent of your clinic address. Choosing a wrong URL is like choosing a bad clinic location, which may mean poor traffic no matter how exquisitely designed your website is. Think of your website like your virtual shop front. A catchy name helps user recall and as the visitor needs to type the name into the internet browser, the name should be simple to spell and type or visitors will find it difficult to find their way to your site.

Tip: Avoid long complex names

Domain names can be of any length up to 67 characters but a name under 15 characters is optimal. Resist the temptation of long names like www.bestclinicinsingapore.com or cute names with strange spellings like www.klinik.com.

A short URL that is easy to recall and spell, preferably similar to your clinic name will be good.

Tip: Avoid hyphens

Example: westclinic.com.sg is fine but west-clinic.com.sg is not preferred. Users may forget to put in the hyphens.

Tip: Choose names with certain keywords

If your clinic name starts with an 'a', 'b' or the first few letters of the alphabet, it may help improve your ranking in search engines as a lot of search engines list websites in alphabetical order. But this is not absolutely essential.

More importantly, choose a name that has important key words like 'medical', 'clinic', or 'doctor'. This can help to improve search ranking for users searching for such services. The idea is that the search engines may give you a boost in the search results for the words included in the domain name. For example, my forum club for local doctors – www.singaporedoctor.net – is highly ranked when a user

searches for 'Singapore doctor' in most search engines. However some search engines place more importance on the keywords in the home page rather than the website name itself. So your introduction paragraph should contain all the keywords.

Step Two: Choosing a hosting plan

After purchasing your website name, you will need a 'shop space' to set up 'shop'. This 'shop space' is in internet terms, the 'hosting space' required. And this space actually sits in a server box which you can lease or even get free.

Tip: Be careful about free web hosting

There are plenty of companies out there which offer free hosting for your website. An example is like www.geocities.com by Yahoo! Inc.

All free hosting like most freebies have strings attached. While many provide reasonably large disk space for your website to run, there may be limitations:

 **Advertising:** As the hosting is free, revenue is generated by advertising on your web pages. Advertising can range from simple banner advertisements to pop-up windows and the products advertised may or may not be related to your website contents. They may irritate your visitors and make your site appear unprofessional. (*Please see box on page 22 for more details.*)

 **Bandwidth limitation:** In layman terms, a low bandwidth is like a small doorway and passage for users to access your shop. Therefore in times of heavy internet user traffic, your website may be very slow to access or even go down as users get 'stuck in the traffic'.

 **Uptime reliability:** Uptime is the exact opposite of 'downtime' which is easily understood by most users when their computer systems are routinely 'closed down' for maintenance. Uptime means the degree of availability at all times. An acceptable uptime is at least 99% which means that in 100 days, your website should be accessible 99 days and downtime may be only one day. Free hosting companies often have much lower uptimes, some lesser than 95%. Good hosting companies often offer a minimum of 99.9%.

 **Technical support:** Often, free hosting companies do not provide much support which is not surprising.

Usually, a free host is useful for beginners to try out and experiment. More serious developers will prefer a commercial host. The cost of commercial

hosting has come down tremendously over the years. Excellent hosting plans can cost less than S\$200 a year to maintain. In selecting a commercial host, the above issues on bandwidth, uptime and technical support apply.

Step Three: Designing your website

After getting your 'name' (URL) and 'shop space' (hosting), you will need some 'renovation works' to spice up the look and appeal.

Most doctors, after years of hard science classes and didactic medical lectures, are clueless about design. Of course some may still retain some artistic and computing talent to be able to design their own web pages. For doctors who want to experience the joy (and frustrations) of creating their very own website, they will do well to pick up the books *Microsoft Frontpage* (simpler) or *Adobe Dreamweaver for Dummies* (a little harder). Personally, I feel Dreamweaver is one of the best web development software around.

For the less adventurous and technically challenged folks, it may be a better idea to spend some money to hire a website developer to save some grey hairs and sleepless nights. A professional web firm can charge a few hundred to thousands for a website depending on the complexity.

Tip: Be careful about freelance web developers

A cheaper option is to engage a freelancer. They can range from precocious 12-year-old kids to disillusioned IT grads. Good ones are often IT students from polytechnics or university who are trying to earn some pocket money. Some of them can produce good quality work on par with professional firms but at a fraction of the price. However, there are also plenty of freelancers who can drive you crazy by being slipshod, slow, or plain irresponsible.

When selecting a web developer, examine their portfolios first. Some have beautiful websites showcasing their past works. They can be a good gauge. Meeting them face-to-face is also important to have a rough gauge of their personalities and attitudes.

Step Four: Putting up information and avoiding medico-legal pitfalls

The main purpose of most websites is to provide information. But in order to "upload" contents into your website, some technical knowledge is required, for instance knowledge of FTP which can be obtained from any website creation books. Again, a hired programmer will take care of this easily. More importantly, you need to be specific as to what kind of information you want to put up.

An internet user now faces a barrage of

information and the average attention span for people surfing a webpage is less than two minutes. If the user cannot find what he or she seeks in your web page at a glance, he or she will simply move on at a click of a mouse. Therefore, your website should have information that is concise, relevant and easy to understand. Your home page should have the key highlights of what you want to say and what your potential patients want to see.

TIP: Important information should be accessible within two to three mouse clicks

Put yourself in the shoes of the general public. Ensure that the information you think the public would most like to have, for example clinic services, address and contact numbers, are on the first page. A good web designer will know how to recommend the best layout for your site.

TIP: Be careful about unsubstantiated claims on your website

The SMC Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines Section 4.4.1 of the Ethical Code and Guidelines states that patients are entitled to protection from misleading information. *(Please see box on page 22 for more details.)*

TIP: Be careful about putting up pictures of patients or procedures.

The SMC Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines Section 4.4.5.2 advises doctors against using animations or photos of patients as well as surgery and consultation procedures. *(Please see box on page 22 for more details.)*

Step Five: Promoting your website: cost-effective ways to let the world know

After your website is created, you need to draw internet traffic to your site. Therefore inform your patients, colleagues, friends, and even family of your website's URL. In addition, print the URL on your name cards, stationery, advertisements and so on.

Further, here are some proven and low budget ways to draw attention to your website:

Tip: Submit your websites to popular search engines like Google, Yahoo, MSN

Countless studies have shown that people commonly use search engines to search for information online. Google has since emerged as the de facto favourite.

Submitting your URL to most search engines is free. However there are paid services to further boost visibility during searches. Google Adwords (www.adwords.google.com) enables you to place your ad on the right-hand side of pages returning relevant results searched by the user. You will pay for every click (a few cents) received by your advertisement. For those worried about fraud, that is someone persistently clicking on your advertisement, Google

has sophisticated means to detect such frauds and can block the advertisement to safeguard the advertiser.

Tip: Exchange web links with other related websites

This means that an external website agrees to put up your web address somewhere on its site, in exchange for you putting up their web address in your site.

For instance, if you run an orthopaedic practice, you can exchange links with related websites for podiatry clinics or back pain support groups.

A better trick is to use a popular search engine, say Google, and do a search of the keywords that are related to your website. The top 10 websites found should be the target of your link exchange. The idea is to place your web address on these popular websites and indirectly draw some of their visitors to your site.

Tip: Contributing articles to related websites or publications

A well-written article in a popular magazine not only helps to educate the public but is also a subtle way to create awareness of your services. Of course, be careful that you do not solicit or claim that your practice is the best, or you may well receive an invitation for 'tea' with the SMC Disciplinary Committee.

Creating a website is a learning process. Most doctors now create websites simply for information dissemination. But the future may not be too far away when some form of telemedicine becomes a reality. Despite our fears and insecurities about a new technology, we should all strive to learn more and remove any irrational fears. The internet like many technological inventions is a double-edged sword, but if we learn to use it properly, both our patients and practices will benefit. ■

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Private Hospitals and Medical Clinics (Publicity) Regulations 2004

Publicity within Singapore

Section 4-1

The licensee of a healthcare institution shall ensure that any publicity of the services of the healthcare institution conducted by him or any other person on his behalf complies with the following requirements:

- (d) The publicity must not contain any laudatory statements (including statements of prominence or uniqueness) or superlatives to describe the services of the healthcare institution;
- (e) The information contained in the publicity must not contain any testimonial or endorsement of the services, including the services of any employee of the healthcare institution; and
- (f) The publicity must not provide information to the public in such a manner as to amount to soliciting or encouraging the use of the services provided by or at any healthcare institution.

Advertising Media

Section 5-2

Where the publicity of the services of a healthcare institution appears in the Internet, the licensee of the healthcare institution shall ensure that the Internet is not used for patient consultation with any employee of the healthcare institution if the patient is not an existing patient of the healthcare institution.

Singapore Medical Council Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines

Section 4.1.1.3 – Remote Consultations in Continuing Care

If a doctor has already established a professional relationship through direct personal contact with a patient, previously made a diagnosis and has commenced treatment, adjusting treatment or providing continued treatment following remote contact with a patient or receipt of electronically transmitted medical data is allowable. If on the other hand it appears from the communication that the patient has developed a new problem or a significant complication, then the doctor shall endeavour to see the patient personally for a further evaluation before offering further treatment.

Section 4.4.1 – General Principles

Both members of the profession and the public require information about doctors whom they can refer patients to or seek consultation from. Patients seeking such information are entitled to protection from misleading information, as they are particularly prone to persuasive influence. Information provided must not exploit patients' vulnerability, ill-founded fear for their future health or lack of medical knowledge.

Doctors can validly provide information about the services they provide to both colleagues and members of the public. However such provision of information shall not become blatant advertising in the commercial sense of the word as this could mislead patients, undermine trust and be demeaning to the profession. The means of providing information must also conform to the Advertising Guidelines of the Private Hospitals and Medical Clinics (PHMC) Act.

Section 4.4.5.1 – The Unique Power of the World-wide-web in Information Projection

Healthcare organisations and individual practitioners nowadays use websites to provide information to doctors and the public. These websites may be about the organisation or doctor, or about a medical topic. The world-wide-web is a very powerful tool for communication as it has great reach and there are many features, such as design and interactivity that could make the information content more attractive and alluring. However the standards of information as spelt out in Sections 4.4.2 and 4.4.3 also apply to websites and a doctor who appears in a website has the responsibility to ensure that information about him and his practice contained in the website and any hyperlinks from the website conform to these standards. In addition, individual doctors' or healthcare institutions' websites must not be sponsored by any pharmaceutical and other such commercial companies.

Section 4.4.5.2 – Guidelines on Website Content

As a wide variety of textual and visual information can be placed on websites, it is necessary to provide guidelines as to what is acceptable, when interpreting the standards prescribed for information about doctors. For example, the website may not have on its web pages or provide hyperlinks to, testimonies from satisfied patients or other doctors. Illustrations are frequently used in websites and where these are of a general nature, they are allowed. However photographs or video clips showing results of surgery, consultations taking place or operative procedures being conducted when these are related to identifiable doctors or patients either directly or by inference, are not allowed. Animation may not be used to promote any aspect of an organisation's or a doctor's practice.