

Website wisdom

Practical advice on internet safety, from **Nigel Knott**.

In my article *Website worries* (*The Dentist*, September 2011) I drew attention to the dangers associated with the publication of a dental practice website on the internet and the raft of professional regulations that must be fulfilled. I will move on to the happier aspects of creating a compliant dental practice website that can safely be published on the internet. However, I must begin with another horror story that occurred recently which illustrates the dangers of employing part-time amateurs to do the job for you.

A dentist employed a friend who was a computer programmer to design and build a website for his practice. The electronic website files were created and transferred to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) where they were hosted in return for a monthly subscription. Everything was fine until the practice website disappeared from the internet without trace and I received a call from a distressed dental nurse asking for help as the practice manager was away on holiday. The web address (URL) had been bought some time previously and detective work led me to the culprit. My enquiry to the ISP was routed to a call centre in India doing little for my blood pressure both in waiting time and a refusal to disclose any information. Finally, I managed to establish that the company had not received the



Nigel Knott

is a dentist and CEO of Dentsure.



Test the waters with an inexpensive scaleable product that can be internet-tested for a short time when you start having a practice website.

hosting fee on the due date and had automatically removed the website from the internet AND totally destroyed all the electronic files nanoseconds later! This is a salutary lesson from which much can be learned and I suspect it is not unique.

Beginning

A dental practice website should serve two basic purposes: it is a patient information centre and an advertisement. An advertising presence online is very different

from the traditional function of a printed space in the local paper or professional journal. I do not wish to enter into any detail here save to say that the advertising material must be ethical and not designed in such a way that could be interpreted by the General Dental Council as seeking professional advantage. Much thought and planning needs to be employed in designing a website for your practice and the more practice staff/patients who are consulted initially the better. Professional design and branding ☺

The home page must download rapidly and provide all essential information without the need to scroll or navigate to other pages.

Expertise will always prove to be a good investment and sometimes the experience of a specialist web designer will give an edge over those used to creating an offline media presence.

Building a website is not something to be taken lightly. It is a permanent professional presence in front of an audience looking at you and the type of dentistry your practice provides via the equivalent of a TV monitor. It is the future of your practice both economically and culturally where there is no room for ICT agnostics. Practices today that have invested in a professional presence on the internet are experiencing a commercial advantage where new high value private patients prefer to visit. It is no longer a question of new patients looking for a dentist with an entry in a rather dated Yell or BT directory but attracting their attention with a prominent position on Google.

Name

Unlike the view expressed by Alice in Wonderland, a word is important and meaningful where the internet is concerned. Your chosen web name (address) or Unified Resource Locator (URL) linked to an Internet Protocol or IP address is your online domicile from which all your electronic links will be processed. Your URL is a vital part of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and prominent Google visibility. Whether or not you decide to use your URL as the source of your email connections is another matter but do not forget that the more URL characters that have to be typed in a web address the more likely it is that errors will occur. Even more so if hyphens and underscores are used and remember that on the telephone it is not easy to repeat long and difficult addresses without using the phonetic alphabet (alpha, sierra, tango etc.)

Service provider

I reinforce the warning of the unseen dangers of employing a local IT agency or friend with little or no experience of dentistry, in the task of building and hosting a compliant practice website.

There are three basic factors to

consider: web hosting, design and content. All have to be melded into the final product that complies with all of the online regulations resting in the hands of the GDC, the Care Quality Commission and the ICO (Information Commissioner's Office). Ideally the task should be entrusted to a company with a good track record of successful website construction and experience of dental practice regulations. The tried and tested formula of seeking recommendations from friends or professional colleagues is still the best option. It is important to be clear about your budget and the type of website you seek to publish on the internet. A customized agency website will cost more than £1,500 (inc VAT) and my advice is to be very cautious before diving in at this end of the pool. Testing the shallower waters with a less expensive scaleable product that can be internet-tested for a short period for free is the best place to start and an annual budget limited to £750 (ex VAT) should suffice. This type of website service (www.practicebox.com) can deliver a static website with a content management system that complies with all the professional regulations and no maintenance costs need to be incurred.

Website hosting

This is perhaps the most important decision of all as it is closely tied to Data Protection Act legislation (ICO/CQC) and what is loosely known as the EU 'safe harbour' data storage initiative. In essence EU legislation seeks to control (and rightly so) the status of online data storage facilities (hosting) to provide a security audit trail in the pursuit of regulatory compliance. Practice principals should ensure they have received the necessary contractual assurances that their website hosting facilities are fit for purpose and the storage or exchange of sensitive patient data can only take place in a securely padlocked environment. Those practices with a customized website of a transactional nature, with facilities to harvest patient data online in the form of appointment booking, patient referrals, case history recording and electronic messaging have additional

regulatory responsibilities to fulfill where patient data protection is concerned.

Design

The home page must download rapidly and provide all essential information without the need to scroll or navigate to other pages – otherwise your website visitor will disappear without trace. Visitors will welcome a picture of the practice itself or a particular feature such as a relaxing reception area or well-equipped and inviting clinical facility. Choose restful colour shades and remember the needs of the partially sighted (accessibility). Include your address (with map link), telephone number (including emergency contact), email address (more about this in the next article), NHS/private treatment/payment plan availability and accreditations on the home page.

Essential content

The GDC regulatory compliance requirements must be strictly observed and 'our team' must include details of all GDC registered staff and their registration numbers together with their qualifications and the certifying authority. It is a good idea to include a picture and brief CV with each entry. The Information Commissioner's Office registration number (Data Protection Act) must be included together with the name of the practice data controller. I also believe that the name of the person responsible for publishing and editing the website (webmaster) should be prominently displayed (usually a member of staff) in the same manner as a journal or magazine.

Essential content of 'our practice' mostly concerns the CQC regulations and legislation that applies to the dental practice itself. The CQC registration number, complaints policy, patient confidentiality, a patient safety charter and accessibility advice should all feature prominently. An excellent example of a very straightforward and easily navigated website that complies with all of the professional regulations can be seen at www.dentalcarenailesea.co.uk

Any changes in practice personnel or practice arrangements must be published within 28 days and an automated date facility is advisable.