



Dermatology Practice Websites 101:

Why a Website Could Help Your Practice and How to Build a Superior Practice Website

By Aaron Dalton

We are now living through the third stage in the evolution of the public's perception of the Internet and the web pages that live on it.

The first stage was the boom in which any Internet page could do no wrong. Dot.com consultancies sprung up to convince every mom-and-pop business that without a website they were doomed.

Such prophecies proved false when the second stage of the Internet's evolution began – the great dot.com bust. As poorly designed, poorly conceived and poorly managed websites literally disappeared overnight, public opinion swung 180 degrees. Suddenly, anything and everything attached to the Internet was suspect, foolish and a waste of time. Websites were seen as nothing more than a drain on a company's precious time and resources.

Not surprisingly, the truth falls somewhere between those two extremes. The Internet is neither a foolproof ticket to riches nor is it a shell game. The Internet is a tool. And as it turns out, it is a tool that is very good at certain types of communication, commerce and community-building.

All of which brings us to the question that matters most to dermatologists – should you have a practice website? What can a website do for you? Is it a frivolous ego boost, a necessary cost of doing business or a valuable asset that can reap great rewards for the practice?

The answers to these questions depend of course on a number of factors – the type of website that a practice seeks to set up, the degree to which the website is made accessible to present and/or future patients and the skill with which the website is planned and built.

This is the first of a series of three articles designed to provide a blueprint for how to create or enhance your practice's website. In this article we look at what content a dermatology practice may want to include on its site in order to make the site a powerful and effective marketing tool. In articles that will appear in upcoming issues of *DBM*, we will analyze the costs in time and money of creating a website and what one should expect in terms of a reasonable return on investment. We will also talk to some of the leaders in this ever-changing field to provide some ideas on how your website's role in marketing your practice will change over time as the Internet evolves.

The Real World and the Internet – They're Closer Than You Think

Think of your website as a representation of your physical practice. Your physical practice has an office (or offices) on streets in a town in a state in a country on a planet called Earth. There is an address that represents the location of your physical practice. Without knowing the address, it will be very difficult for anyone to find your practice unless they happen to just stumble across it or drive by it.

Your physical practice may advertise – in the phone book, in newspapers or magazines, in mailings – or you may rely solely on a sign on the street or on word of mouth. There are many marketing tools that your practice probably uses to help people discover that you exist, where to find you and how to get to you.

Once current or potential patients do arrive at your practice, they are greeted with certain physical sensations – the size of the sign and the typeface say something about your practice, so does the decoration in the waiting room and the exam rooms, the type of literature you have on display, the colors of the carpet or flooring and the walls.

When you speak with your patients, your tone of voice, the words you use, the way you explain or listen to their problems all help patients to form a holistic impression of your practice. If the overall impression is favorable, the patients will form a lasting and satisfactory relationship with the practice and recommend the practice to their friends and relations to the satisfaction of all involved.

What does all of this have to do with a *website*? Too many businesspeople in all sorts of occupations – physicians included – seem to believe they can simply throw up any old site, slap

Too many businesspeople seem to believe they can simply throw up any old site, slap on a couple of pictures and a bio and consider their work done.

on a couple of pictures and a bio, add a “Contact Us” email link and consider their work done.

Of course, slapdash self-presentation is not only unsatisfactory, it is damaging, no matter what the medium. The Internet is only another medium of self-presentation. The offline ITRW (In The Real World) analogy of a careless website would be to use folding tables and chairs in the waiting room, a hastily scrawled sign on the street and a stick-figure ad in the paper. Obviously no dermatologist who wanted to remain long in business would attempt such corner-cutting ITRW, but on the Net, dermatologists seem ready to believe that different rules apply.

Aesthetics matter a great deal – especially in a field like dermatology that often promises improved physical appearance as a treatment outcome. For patients to have confidence in the aesthetic potentials of a treatment regimen, they need to also have faith in the dermatologist's overall aesthetic sense, which is expressed in every aspect of a practice's communications including the Internet.

So a dermatology practice needs to consider all the analogous factors of an ITRW practice when designing and building a website – what is the right neighborhood, what is the right design, how should the practice present itself, how can it bring in new customers and retain the loyalty of existing customers, how can it foster communication with patients and work in the most efficient manner possible?

If You Build It, Will They Come?

If you place your real world dermatology practice in the middle of a cornfield, don't bother putting up a sign and never tell a soul that you're open for business, you'll probably have a lot of time between appointments.

Getting people to know you have a website and motivating them to actually visit your website is the greatest challenge.

your website is the greatest challenge! Think about it – companies like Amazon.com and Ebay.com spend millions of dollars in advertising, marketing and sponsorships to get consumers to visit their websites. Even companies like Yahoo! that help Web users find all the other sites on the Internet still spend millions of dollars on advertising to keep consumers using their search engine as opposed to the various other search engines on the market.

Many dermatologists seem to believe that building a website is their greatest challenge. It's not. Getting people to know you have a website and motivating them to actually *visit*



Consumers have thousands and thousands of sites to choose from – sites with continuously updated entertainment and games and distractions. How can your practice's website get surfers' attention? In a worst case scenario, dermatologists face the tragic potential of spending thousands of dollars and scores of hours building and maintaining a website only to have that website sit alone and unvisited like a mariner marooned on a desert island off the map of the known world far from all shipping routes and inhabited nations. But this worst case scenario can be easily avoided by dermatologists who market their sites to clients and to the community while simultaneously taking steps to develop a strategy that ensures more casual surfers can also find the site.

DBM conducted a random search for a New York dermatology practice on Yahoo!, one of the most popular search engines on the market, by typing "New York" and "dermatology" and clicking the search button.

The sponsor sites are the equivalents of great big billboards hanging in Times Square.

The search turned up several kinds of sites – sponsor websites, practice websites and general industry sites. It also turned up some mismatches, like a dentistry practice's website.

The sponsor sites, like www.nycdermatology.com, are the equivalents of great big billboards hanging in Times Square. They are impossible to miss, because there are only two or three sponsor sites at the top or bottom of the search page. They are listed in bold type before and after the ten or so non-sponsor search engine returns in the middle of the page. Regular non-sponsor returns are listed in a plain, non-bolded typeface.

Dermatology Website Profile

www.bigappleskin.com
Dr. Judith Hellman
New York, NY



1. How long have you had a website and why did you create one?

Planning for the site began about a year ago. I was invited on to the Howard Stern radio show and knew that my appearance would give me lots of exposure, so I wanted to have a website up and running by the time I went on the air. The site has actually been live on the Internet now since last July.

2. What were your goals for your website and how did your goals affect the content and design of the site?

I believe that the Internet is one of the most important ways that people look for physicians nowadays. We ask every patient who comes to our practice how they found us and no one has mentioned sources like the Yellow Pages in years. People cite either our own website, an insurance company's website or personal referrals.

I looked at other dermatologists' websites before I designed my own and I decided that a lot of them were not user friendly and/or contained too much medical lingo which even I would not have been able to understand if I had not been a dermatologist.

I wrote all the text for the site myself and tried to write it so that people would understand the different types of treatments that we offer and also how those treatments could interact with each other. I wanted the site to be informative. The patients who do find me through the Internet tell me that they can relate to the information on my site, so the site really brings patients to the practice.

And I wanted to really communicate one concept: that beauty is not something that is specific to a certain age and that dermatology treatments can help people enhance their appearance no matter what their age.

3. Do you feel that the website has met your goals/helped your practice?

I feel that the website has given me a lot of exposure. While I haven't yet figured the exact number of patients who have come to my practice through the website, I can say that more and more people are finding the practice through the site. The site appears very high up among New York City dermatology listings via Yahoo! and Google searches. So the site gives me visibility, which is what I wanted it to do.

4. As you said, your site appears among the top listings returned by search engine queries for dermatologists in your region. How were you able to achieve this?

The excellent visibility for the site is really the glory of my designer/developer, Ran Berkman. We worked together on deciding which keywords we would use to help the site appear high among search returns. There was a process of refinement in which I would go onto Google and pretend I was a patient. I would put in dermatology questions and see if my site appeared on the front page among the search returns. If the site was missing, we would go back and edit the keywords to improve the site's performance on that query.

Today, everyone is computer savvy, even people who are over 50 or 60 years of age. They know what Google is and will use the Internet to try to find information. A practice site can provide them with far greater information than a print ad or a phone directory ad.

5. Your site has some interesting features – for example, a Members Club – that are not widely seen on the Internet. How did you come up with that idea?

The membership club was actually Ran's idea. It gives us an email list of people with information on the treatments in which they are interested. We give them some financial specials on treatment packages that compensate them for the effort of signing up and in return we can target people a bit better when giving information on treatments and procedures.

6. Your site design and organization is both aesthetically pleasing and professional. How did you develop these aspects of the site?

The design and computer programming came from Ran, who I found through a strong personal recommendation. Ran did all the programming himself, but we worked together on the design and visuals of the site. The picture of the lady on the homepage, for example, comes from my business card.

I tried to tell him my vision of ageless beauty that I wanted the site to communicate. He worked very hard on implementing my vision and just kept experimenting until finally I said, "This is it."

I think the dermatologist has to collaborate with the designer when working on a website. The site has to look pleasing to you. You can go back and forth with the design of the site, but in the end when you look at it you should think that this is the way the site should look in order to communicate the philosophy of your practice.

I also continuously try to improve my site by soliciting and responding to patient and site visitor feedback. For example, one visitor to my site noted that I did not have any pictures of men on my website. I thought this was a valid critique, so I put a picture of a man under the laser treatment section. I don't just ask my patients if they like my site, I ask them what they like and why they like it. That way I get specific ideas on how to make the site even better.

So search engine sponsorship offers visibility – a can't-miss visibility akin to a giant neon billboard. Such visibility obviously has its pros. To a searcher, the non-sponsor sites can simply blur into an endless list of names. Bewildered and disoriented, such a searcher might very well turn to the first or second boldfaced name on the page simply because those names stand out. On the other hand, search engine sponsorship costs money and could seem a bit too self-promotional to some potential patients – as if the dermatologist herself were standing on the sidewalk flagging down cars as they drove past her ITRW office.

To patients who prefer a bit more understated approach, the non-sponsor matches *at the top of the list* may appeal most. The key of course is to appear at the top of the list, because odds are most casual searchers won't delve into the 200th non-sponsor site that the search engine returns, whereas the eighth site might catch their eye. How can a site guarantee that it will appear at or near the top of a search engine listing without paying for sponsorship?

Attempting to guarantee such returns is the goal of a discipline known as search engine optimization (see sidebar, "Search Engine Marketing," on page 57).

Of course, search engines are not the only way that visitors will find your site. You should try to register and buy a memorable site address (also known as a URL – Universal Resource Locator). Generally you own the use of this site address on an annual, renewable basis for which you'll pay a nominal fee of around \$35 per year.

Once you have a site built and sitting at that memorable address, proceed to add your URL to every piece of material

