

# **Expansion Through Technology**

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## Expansion Through Technology

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In today's age of sophisticated technology, it is unrealistic to think your office can advance to its fullest capacity without taking full advantage of one of your most valuable tools...the computer. The notion of using your computer to perform only the most basic tasks of practice management (like word processing or billing and more recently, to enforce electronic claims submissions process) is unrealistic and not goal-oriented. This tunnel-vision approach can prevent you from seeking out newer, simple cost-effective internet approaches to increase patient satisfaction and expand your patient base. In addition, at a time when patients may feel cheated from less time spent with their doctors due to HMO-related limitations, you can actually create an alternative new-age source of communication; thus providing new and established patients with a self-imposed higher standard of quality care. When you compare the internet methods of distributing information to your patients via web pages, email and electronic newsletters to the traditional ones of printing and postage, you realize a great financial motivation to change. Combine that with the awareness that these new methods can contribute in taking your practice to a whole new level of marketing and expansion. You owe it to yourself to look more closely into implementing some new strategies. Physician-based web sites, for example, will help to provide patients with a more valuable media for not only obtaining "trusted" medical information, but also in offering physician-patient interactive services. Now, at a time most convenient to them in the privacy of their own home, appointment scheduling and prescription renewal requests can all be done with only the touch of a finger.

These projects do not have to be tackled all at once and in fact, I would recommend concentrating on one at a time in order to put your full efforts into making each one as professional and successful as possible. Of course, when dealing with both web sites and newsletters, content is of prime importance and your main focus should be to offer patients value. Don't forget that these tools are going to represent your office and you don't want to stand behind something that is tacky and uninviting, not to mention insufficient in meeting your needs.

So where do you start? You have two distinctive routes to take, each of which will depend on your financial position. 1) You can hire a company to help you put together a web page from start to finish...asking only for informational input from you to help personalize each page or 2) if you (or a staff member) have a flare for writing, one or both of you can use your imagination and sink your teeth into the development of this interesting project together as a team. In any case, your website layout may consist of:

- location (many web sites feature links to places like Mapquest or Yahoo to provide your patients with a tailored map and directions to your office)
- photos which allow visual contact with you (a brief biography including your educational background), your office and qualified staff
- various contacts to the office (for general or specific billing info, office manager, HIPAA concerns, etc.)
- ability to request appointments and/or purchase supplies (if your office offers these services)
- treatments and services you provide (including new services such as ESWT or laser or the Diabetic Shoe Program)
- a list of insurance companies that you participate in
- posting informational policies (such as billing or Privacy)

- specialized forms that patients can download, fill out at home and bring with them to the office in preparation for their visit
- an educational resource center for your patients regarding various foot conditions that they would like to learn more about
- An archive of e-newsletters (if this is put in place) for those who want to visit past issues

If you are considering an email newsletter which will involve an output mail merge of information to your patients, you will want to start (if you haven't already) gathering patient email addresses on your registration form. According to a Feb. 5, 2003 survey conducted by Harris Interactive (a worldwide market research and consulting firm, best known for *The Harris Poll*), 67% of adults (140 million people) are now online. This information suggests that targeting an email audience proves to be worthwhile. To make more of a case for email, it was also noted back in January, 2001 that 81% of the online population wished to receive e-mail reminders for preventive care while 83% of them wanted follow-up e-mails after visits to doctors. Today, in our office, the use of email to remind patients of their appointments is requested almost as much as telephone calls. Considering this trend of email growth, internet access will surely become the standard as the *preferred* patient contact medium. Just as an office of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century could not function effectively without a phone, neither will an office of the 21<sup>st</sup> survive without a hard drive.

Next, you might want to teach yourself (or, again, include your staff) "how to" manage a mail merge program. If you prefer to have someone on the outside responsible for submitting newsletters, begin researching costs (set-ups and monthly charges) from your (and other) Internet Service Providers (ISP's). Either way, once you are set up, other considerations would be to:

- brainstorm with staff and colleagues on what information you'd like to include to keep it new and refreshing.
- Direct web site visitors how to subscribe to receive issues on your web site, as well as how to unsubscribe, should they decide to do so.
- Compile a target list of recipients (e.g., patients, PCP's, pharmacies, physical therapists, etc.)

Once you've developed a positive mind-set, visit some medical websites to gather ideas and start compiling a list of items which you find most appealing. While the overall project may seem a bit confusing and intimidating at first, developing a patient e-mail newsletter or a website loaded with content... or better yet, a combination of the two.... is an exciting journey into the future. It is said, "*Each new journey begins with a step*" and if a website existed to help you follow this concept, it would be called: [www.don'tbeafraidtotakeit.com](http://www.don'tbeafraidtotakeit.com)! It is a surefire formula for innovative expansion.

## **Ride the Technology Wave**

Everyday we see more and more businesses updating the look and feel of their offices and stores by employing the latest technological advances. Simple items like computer monitors have evolved so that there is a "class" division between outdated CRTs and modern flat panel displays. Patients do notice the difference because many have switched to flat panel displays in their homes as the prices have plummeted on these devices. Other benefits to the switch to flat panel monitors are they are less likely to be interfered by fluorescent lighting as the CRTs are, they have a smaller foot print on desks relieving space issues and they have a narrower viewing angle so that they can not be read from the sides, this makes them more HIPPA compliant if placed in the right area of your office.

Technology has also evolved in the area of telecommunications. Many small office phone systems today provide updatable music/message on hold features as well as voice mailboxes.

Callers can place messages in the mailbox of their choice depending upon their needs, i.e.: making appointments, speaking to the billing department etc. Also, many of the new systems integrate wireless headsets that allow the staff member to receive and answer phone calls away from the base unit. This would allow for multitasking of your staff, i.e. they can answer the phone and process x rays at the same time, or leave their desk to find a patient chart while on the phone.

Technology has also found its place in the armamentarium of the practicing podiatrist. One only has to attend a podiatry conference to see the number of companies bringing diagnostic ultrasound to the podiatric community. It is a very valuable modality and certainly sets the minds of the patient, that the doctor employing this technology is technologically advanced.

Each practitioner should take the time to assess their practices "technology factor" and decide if it is time to implement "upgrades" to enhance their practices.