


Spring 1998

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Recommended Citation

Shepherd, C. D., and Daniel Fell. "Building Web Sites that Attract Visitors." *Marketing health services* 18.1 (1998): 44-5. Print.

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Building Web Sites that Attract Visitors

By C. David Shepherd and Daniel Fell

Our last column included the optimistic prediction, "Health care marketers will use the Internet to help build a closer relationship between the provider and the customer." The good news is, for some health care marketers, this prediction is becoming a reality. Unfortunately, for most there is no evidence this is occurring. Instead, as we talk to health care marketers across the country, we encounter significant disappointment with their Internet investments.

The most common complaint is that, after investing time and capital into building a Web site, marketers are rewarded with few visits. Worse, when the sites are visited, the visits are short and visitors seldom come back for a second look. When perusing the health care sites on the Web, it is painfully obvious why so few are visited on a regular basis. The sites simply do not provide enough value to attract and retain visitors.

THREE GENERATIONS

The state of health care Web sites can be characterized as three generations of development. They include:

- Generation 1, where sites are little more

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than electronic versions of printed support materials.

- Generation 2, which have been designed to be interactive.
- Generation 3, a level of sophistication characterized by the site's transaction capability and by the visitors' ability to customize content to best suit their needs.

Most health care organizations launch their Internet voyage at the Generation 1 level. Typically, these sites contain a corporate overview, mission statement, list of products and services, history of the

organization, directions to facilities or providers, and copies of newsletters or press releases. Common Generation 1 site characteristics are their largely static presentations that seldom change and their mass communication approach. They are not interactive in nature.

Valuable Support

Generation 1 Web sites can be very useful. They can provide consumers with valuable information for selecting a hospital or other provider. Even when they mirror a provider's printed materials, Generation 1 sites offer distinct advantages. First, they give visitors the opportunity to collect information at the time they need it. Second, they can be updated quickly and inexpensively, unlike updates of printed brochures. Third, Generation 1 Web sites provide virtual tours of the provider's facilities and other information that cannot be included in traditional printed materials. Finally, they can provide a depth of information that would be impractical in printed form. In fact, the best of the Generation 1 Web sites are designed to provide content that is valuable to the specific markets the provider wishes to target.

Interactivity

Generation 2 sites typically are even more focused on the needs of their primary target audiences. But what really makes Generation 2 sites distinctive is their interactive design. Instead of simply perusing the available information and interacting with the site provider through e-mail, visi-

tors can engage in two-way interaction with the health care provider. Common features of Generation 2 sites include surveys, pull-down menus, search engines, special offers or prizes, searchable directories, and custom forms that allow the visitor to provide feedback, request information, and schedule services.

These features have three primary goals: involve the user and create a reason to return, collect valuable demographic and psychographic data about the visitor, and make the technology invisible to the visitor. The last goal is important when the visitor wants specific information or a way to carry out a transaction with the provider.

A number of large, established health systems and tertiary referral centers maintain Generation 2 Web sites. Among those worth visiting are the sites of Allina Health System (<http://www.allina.com>), Promina Health System (<http://www.promina.org>), and Columbia/HCA (<http://www.columbia-hca.com>).

Mass Customization

Generation 3 Web sites are characterized by two broad applications. The first is the transaction capability, which allows visitors to review personal health-benefit information, select a provider, participate in on-line chats, update personal information, purchase a service or product, and complete other transactions specific to their needs. The second is the ability of

visitors to define content or features and customize the site.

This customization is made possible through complex databases, maintained by the Web site, that recognize return visitors by retaining information about previous visits and interactions. Managed care companies have been more aggressive in developing these capabilities. A good illustration of a Generation 3 Web site is United Healthcare's (<http://www.uhc.com>).

BUILDING IT ISN'T ENOUGH

People will only visit a Web site if it provides value. Visitors to Generation 1 sites are current and potential customers, current and potential employees, competitors, and salespeople; in short, the same people who traditionally read the organization's printed materials. Generation 1 sites have the potential of enhancing provider/customer relationships by providing easy access to pertinent information. However, lack of interactivity and the inability to carry out transactions and customize the site to suit the individual visitor's needs do little to encourage return visits.

But a Generation 1 Web site is an excellent first step to integrate health care marketing with the Internet. In fact, a Generation 1 site might meet the objectives of many organizations, especially smaller ones, that simply desire an Inter-

net presence. However, many Web sites are evolving toward Generations 2 and 3, an evolution that will require a high level of commitment from management. Given the commitment required, we caution organizations to proceed in this direction only after they have a strategic plan for their Internet presence.

That plan should encompass at least three areas. First, it should identify what the organization hopes to accomplish with its Internet presence. Second, it should identify the Web site's target market. In other words, Whom do you want to visit your site? Finally, the plan should identify the types of information that this market would value. In short, what do you want people to do once they visit the site?

ROADBLOCKS TO SUCCESS

Developing a strategic plan is essential to the successful use of the Internet in health care marketing. Unfortunately, most organizations simply allow their Internet presence to evolve. We have encountered many organizations that allow each department to maintain its own Web site with little or no input from marketing.

With that kind of arrangement, the health care provider has no hope of presenting a consistent message. To overcome this obstacle, in the next issue we will provide a framework for strategically planning an Internet presence. ■

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