

View from the frontline: Setting up a website

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Being involved in the commissioning of a website is great fun but having a busy, successful website is even more fun.

Websites are powerful communication, informational and commercial tools. Their attraction lies in the fact that not only large businesses and organisations, but one-man bands, small groups and even families can stake their unique presence in cyberspace by creating highly individual websites. Of course you can create your own website, design and build it yourself, and arrange for hosting and the purchasing of a suitable domain or you can pass on the whole task to one of the numerous providers out there. Which path you take depends on your budget, the amount of spare time you have, your technical ability, and the scope and size of the project.

Twice in the last couple of years or so, I have been involved in the commissioning of a website for a particular purpose and each time had to face the dilemma of what to do and which way to proceed. On each occasion, we went to an expert and let them lead on the whole project and, on completion and seeing the final product, I was delighted with the new website.

The first project was a GP practice website and the first decision was to decide who to commission, assuming we were not going to build it ourselves. We looked around and eventually found an organisation, Internet-GP <www.internet-gp.com>, that had produced a fair number of GP websites and their rates were competitive as well. For a GP website, it is essential that the organisation designing the website are conversant with the needs of a GP and this was the clinching factor that made us choose this website designer. In a relatively short time, the site came online and you can see the final result at <www.leedsgps.com> – we were delighted with the outcome.

This year, I and a few other colleagues started to talk about publishing a free diabetic newsletter aimed at the health professional. In this modern era, it is much more cost-effective to produce and distribute a

newsletter electronically and, in reality, that means sending it out to users by email. We also needed to have an online presence, where we could showcase what we wanted to do, maintain an archive of our email newsletter and allow people to subscribe to our newsletter, so this really meant constructing a website. On this occasion, we needed a sophisticated website with lots of back office functions that dealt with the newsletter archive, allowed people to subscribe by email, and allowed us to generate some analysis of people using the website. This required a high level of technical ability, which is way beyond what we could do as amateur builders of websites.

After some searching, we found a company, Wired up Wales <www.wiredupwales.com>, that could handle our requirements and again was within budget. As with my previous experience, I was delighted with the final outcome and you can see it for yourself at Glycosmedia <www.glycosmedia.com>.

So what have I learnt from these two experiences? Well the main message is: if you want a good result then leave it to the experts, unless you have high quality web design skills with plenty of in-depth experience and oodles of spare time. There are some health professionals who are lucky enough to possess such expertise and spare time, but I am sure they are in the small minority. Not only is the functionality of a website important but it has to look good and be appealing to the visitor. Its initial look and feel can allow a viewer surfing through the site to come to a quick conclusion on its usefulness. An attractive, painless-to-navigate website with all the facilities easily accessible is a huge asset and hopefully will encourage visitors to return. It is also important to make sure everything works just fine before site launch: this is critical to the success of the site. I found quotes for the cost of the whole project varied

considerably, but there are good value web designers out there and word-of-mouth and personal recommendations are very important.

I have also found that once the website is up and running and has an established place in cyberspace, it is essential to have on-going technical support, unless you have the necessary technical skills to support the on-going maintenance of the site. Yes, technical support does cost money, but if you are not prepared to invest both time and money in your site then don't proceed. It is amazing how much on-going technical support is needed, from site updates to shuffling around of content, and redesigns as the role of the website matures, expands and requires greater functionality.

Another issue to consider, once the website is up and running, is marketing it to the client group. Marketing the practice website is relatively easy: we have a small, well-defined practice population whom it is quite possible to reach. Glycosmedia is a much tougher prospect. The audience is global and includes not only health professionals but interested patients as well. Although there are not that many diabetic news sites out there, the internet, in general, is a crowded marketplace and it takes a while to spread the word. Email is a cheap and effective method to spread the word but you have got to find your target audience out there by locating their email addresses. Yes, there are blogs, links and search engines but it takes time to find your target audience and interest them in your offering. So energy and persistence is needed, not only to build a website but to care for it and nurture it after launch.

Being involved in the commissioning of a website is great fun but having a busy, successful website is even more fun. Careful planning, getting experts involved and marketing it to the desired client group are critical in getting your message across.