

Prescriptions Medical Alert

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Optimizing Your Online Presence

These days, almost every medical practice has a website. But there is a big difference between having a domain name and optimizing your online presence. If your practice has not improved the functionality or added new content to your website recently, you may be missing out on opportunities to provide better service to your patients, attract new patients, and reduce the administrative workload of your staff.

Due to limited resources, smaller physicians' practices often have little more than the basics on their websites. These sites are frequently limited to pictures and brief biographies of physicians and staff members, an office address and phone number, and an invitation to e-mail the practice.

There are, however, many ways to expand this content and make your site more interactive and useful to patients. You can start, for example, by posting articles on medical issues of interest to your patients. To improve the appearance of your website, while providing patients with useful information, take advantage of free widgets offered by search engines or other health-related sources, like the Centers for Disease Control. Widgets or gadgets are plug-ins that can be easily added to your website, allowing users to click through to important information or to participate in interactive assessments of their health status.

Some practices go further, posting videos and podcasts that explain various aspects of general health or offer advice on how to stop smoking or strengthen bones. There are a number of providers that can provide your practice with content of this kind at reasonable prices. With a bit more time and effort, your practice can make its own videos.

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Managing Drug Samples Safely and Responsibly

As the role played by pharmaceutical sales representatives in the practice of medicine comes under increasing scrutiny, many physicians are rethinking how they manage prescription drug samples. There has been a growing concern that certain medications are being prescribed to patients because they are “free,” and that improper storage of these prescription drug samples could lead to theft or abuse. To discourage the potential misuse of these medications, your practice may want to review its policies and procedures regarding drug samples.

To begin, be sure to always store prescription drug samples in a locked cabinet or closet, never in the desks or open cabinets of an exam room or office. Legal action or even criminal charges could result if your practice fails to carefully track its drug sample inventory and ensure that no drugs fall into the wrong hands.

For maximum safety, the practice may choose to use a single locked storage compartment for drug samples. One or more designated employees should

be responsible for keeping track of the keys and maintaining records of any drugs that are added to or removed from the cabinet. These records typically include information about when the drug was accepted by the practice, the representative who provided the sample, the lot number and expiration date of the drug, the individual physician or other staff member who dispensed the sample, the name of the patient who received it, and the patient’s condition. Never allow pharmaceutical representatives to add stock to the cabinet without supervision, and ensure that staff members do not help themselves to medications without following proper procedures.

The office manager and the physicians may review these records regularly to check for irregular patterns that could indicate theft or abuse. A look at the records may also reveal, for example, that one doctor is using more of a particular sample than another. The staff member in charge of drug sample storage can monitor the inventory regularly for samples nearing their expiration dates. If your

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Cash or Credit?

While the number of medical practices that accept payment by credit card has grown over the years, some physicians remain skeptical about accepting plastic, largely due to concerns about the extra fees and administrative work involved, especially when credit cards are used for relatively small co-pays. There are, however, ways your practice can minimize fees and take advantage of the ease of credit card payments to reduce the number of bills sent to patients.

From a financial perspective, the main disadvantages of accepting credit cards are the upfront costs of purchasing credit card terminals and printers, and the ongoing transaction fees, which can skim as much as 3% or even 4% off of each payment. To cover the fees, you could consider levying an additional fee when patients pay with credit cards.

Yet, even if the practice absorbs the transaction fees, having the full amount owed paid upfront and on time may prove worth the extra cost. The practice

stands to lose more money when patients are late in paying their bills, when a check bounces, or when patients request a payment plan. Especially when a smaller sum is involved, the cost of sending out a bill and processing the payment later are often higher than the fees charged by credit card companies.

In addition, when practices offer the option of paying by credit card, they may avoid devoting large amounts of time and resources to tracking late payments and administering payment plans by mail. If a patient is regularly late in paying bills, having his or her credit card on file can make it easier to collect payment at time of service. Patients can also be offered the option of using a credit card to pay bills over the phone or through the practice website. If a payment plan is necessary, a patient can agree to have a specific amount automatically billed to his or her credit card monthly.

Accepting credit cards and other types of electronic payment may give your practice a competitive

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These may, for example, feature interviews with physicians on different medical topics, virtual tours of the facilities, demonstrations of medical procedures, patient testimonials, or even humorous skits or holiday greetings from the office staff. Clips of this kind are easy to make and upload to your website, but a marketing firm with experience in video production can also be enlisted to help identify appropriate topics and achieve better production results.

If the physicians in your practice have the time and the interest, you may also want to consider including one or more physician blogs on the website. These blogs, which can be maintained in part by support staff, could, for example, provide links to new research or articles in various publications. Blogs that are updated regularly encourage patients to check back periodically. When special content is posted on a blog, such as an update on the availability of swine flu vaccinations or the arrival or departure of a physician, an email alert can be sent to patients with a link to the new posting.

If your practice has switched to an electronic medical record (EMR) system, you may also want to add an interactive patient portal to your website. Patient portals have varying levels of complexity, but they generally include secure access to medical records, options to send or receive medical test results or images in electronic form, options for encrypted e-mail communication with doctors and other staff members, and functions for requesting appointments, prescription refills, or referrals. There are firms that specialize in designing interactive portals for medical practices, offering basic solutions that can be tailored to the needs of your practice.

Yet, even if your website is state-of-the-art, it will not be fully effective unless large numbers of people are using it. When prospective patients search for practices in their area, the first results they find are often large medical directory sites, rather than the websites of local practices. Usually, your practice can be listed on these directory sites for a nominal charge.

To drive more traffic to your website, you may wish to consult a web design firm that specializes in search engine optimization (SEO). The leading search engines have various criteria that determine the placement in search results of each relevant website. While purchasing a sponsored listing is obviously the best way to move to the top of the results, an SEO expert can use other tactics to move your practice up in the rankings, such as identifying the best keywords, changing the layout of the homepage to make it “search engine-friendly,” and adding links and content that will attract search-engine “spiders.”

There are also less technical ways to drive current and potential patients to your website. For example, all the physicians in the practice can note the practice’s web address on their business cards, and the address can be prominently featured in all print advertisements and marketing material, as well as on all office stationery, including letterhead, appointment cards, and even notepads. Patients can also be reminded of the web address via phone, through “on hold” or voicemail messages.

Whether you are striving to attract new patients, educate current patients, or reduce the administrative workload of your staff, now is the time to optimize your online presence. *P*

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advantage. Even patients who have the cash to pay in full may prefer the convenience of paying with a credit card. Bank debit cards can also be accepted in lieu of checks, which take several days to process and could bounce. When using debit cards, having patients enter their own pin numbers, rather than processing the transaction like a credit card, may result in lower fees.

While many of the fees associated with credit cards are non-negotiable, you may request a better deal from the bank that provides your practice’s merchant account for credit card processing. Some providers offer better rates than others, so it is worth shopping around. Medical associations may be able to recommend merchant account providers that offer favorable rates to physicians. *P*

Work-Life Balance Remains a Challenge for Physicians

Most physicians in America are satisfied with their profession, but a majority also admit that they are having trouble striking a balance between their professional and personal lives, according to a survey conducted by *Physicians Practice* magazine.

The magazine polled nearly 1,600 physicians, asking them about their outlook on work, life, family, and politics. Results showed that more than half (52.7%) of doctors strongly agree with the statement “I like being a physician,” while another 29.8% agree. Most doctors also appear to be satisfied with their current employment situations: Fewer than one-third (32.1%) said they often wish they could change jobs or employers.

When asked what the single most important factor was in choosing their clinical specialty, more than three-quarters (76.5%) said they found the specialty clinically stimulating, while just 7.7% attributed their choice to the hours, and only 2.5%, to the income potential. Nearly 80% are at least fairly happy with their specialty.

Two-thirds (66%) of respondents said they do not believe they have enough time for their personal lives, and 44% said they spend more than 10 waking hours with their families during the working week. Just over half (52.7%) said they work 50 or fewer hours a week, while 26.6% said they work 51–60 hours and 11.4% said they work 61–70 hours. *P*

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practice has a barcode or other electronic system for tracking inventory, drug samples can be integrated into this system.

Even when drug samples are stored securely, questions remain about how the medications enter the practice and how they are distributed. For better or for worse, drug samples can influence the clinical decisions of physicians, leading them to prescribe drugs that the patient has first taken as a sample, even if less expensive and equally effective alternatives are available. Some studies have indicated that doctors may distribute drug samples more freely than they would issue prescriptions, which could result in patients taking medications they don't really need.

Drug samples can be used to help indigent patients who would otherwise be unable to afford medications. However, clinical studies have shown that most samples go not to the poor, but to insured patients who could have paid for their own prescriptions. And, when low-income or uninsured patients

are given samples of expensive drugs, the chances that they will stop taking the medication when the sample runs out are high.

Safety can also become an issue when drugs are dispensed by physicians instead of by pharmacists. It is part of a pharmacist's job to remind patients verbally and through labels and printed materials of the proper dosage of the drug and possible side effects. They are also available to answer any questions from the patient. When a physician hands a sample to a patient, proper instructions and information regarding drug interactions, or other adverse effects, may be overlooked.

It is important to keep in mind that drug samples are marketing tools that could, however unconsciously, influence the clinical decisions of physicians. Developing clear policies and procedures regarding the management of drug samples can help ensure that they are stored, tracked, and distributed as safely and responsibly as possible. *P*