

Whither.com

The concept of a single place to find out everything you ever wanted to know is an attractive one in theory, but I suspect an impossible dream

The title of this leader is not the *BDJ's* attempt to enter the e-commerce market with a trendy domain name (whither.com has already been taken) but a genuine query as to where we are going in the escalating 'dot com' growth that is occurring all around us.

As most people must know by now the phrase 'dot com' refers to the use of a 'domain name' to identify your presence on the internet, such as lastminute.com. But while it is simply a name (like your own name, the name of your company or the address where you live) the phrase 'dot com' has come to represent the world of digital communications and e-commerce (electronic commerce).

The 'dot com' presence in UK dentistry was raised several notches at *Dentistry 2000* where a number of stands were occupied by a few high profile companies asserting their position by use of carefully orchestrated promotion. These companies are setting themselves up as 'portals', basically websites that act as a 'homebase' for users to obtain links to other sites as well as providing relevant updates and news tailored to the interests of their users. I suspect they are the first of many, and although it is very easy to register with these companies as an interested participant, it is difficult at the moment to understand exactly what they will be offering and how relevant that will be in the future.

What each of these portals is saying at the moment is that they will be the 'main electronic contact' for everyone in dentistry, at least in the UK. If you want to find out anything about dentistry, whether you are a member of the public or a member of the dental world, then theirs (so they claim) is the website that will enable you to do so (and each believes they will be the main one). This is a bold claim, and although it is early days I decided to test out the current contenders by seeing which of them could be found using an internet search. After all, if they are to be the main portal to everyone else then that assumes they would be easy to find on the internet if I was looking.

I used three popular search engines, Yahoo, Alta Vista and FAST (software programmes that enable you to type in a word or phrase and it will identify the appropriate websites for you). I inserted the word 'dental' to see the result. Yahoo was too difficult for me (there were just too many choices), Alta Vista provided 2,925,498 possible sites and FAST offered 895,169 sites. Although various dental organisations and associations were identified fairly near the top of the list (on Alta Vista the BDA was number 16 which is pretty impressive) there was no sign of any of the current dot coms in the top 200. It would appear they are not quite ready yet to claim they are the main portals for UK dentistry as far as the search engines are concerned.

There are two other concerns. The first is that the concept of a single place to find out everything you ever wanted to know is an attractive one in theory, but I suspect an impossible dream. People do not always want to have their choices made for them, and 'one-stop shops' may sound appealing but have never really succeeded. The second concern is the question of how these companies will receive their funding, and have they done the right sums? We are seeing the results of some of the 'dot com' miscalculations elsewhere in the market at the moment, and it is difficult to see how the dental portals will continue to finance themselves. Who is actually going to pay — and for what?

Despite all this, the real question for the future is how we will change our thinking, our perceptions and our behaviour as the internet develops. All the dental 'dot coms' seem to be assuming we will behave in a certain way, but I suspect that the revolution in the 'dot com' world has yet to occur — and it is not in the market but in our own minds.

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