

A window to the world

A website is one of the most important promotional tools a dental practice can have. In his recent *BDJ* article,¹ Paul Downes explains how to achieve online success. Adapted for *Vital* by **Kate Maynard**.

Introduction

For many, the Internet is now the first point of call when looking for information. One survey estimated that in 2005, there were 22 million people using the Internet at least once a month in the UK, and this figure is undoubtedly still rising. For a dental practice, a website may provide the prospective new patient with their 'first impression'; this may be days or weeks before they actually visit the practice. This article considers the different approaches to creating a dental practice website and offers advice on how to ensure that your website complies with current regulations.

Why create a practice website?

The most common reason for creating a

practice website is to promote the services of the practice. This may be aimed towards the existing patient base or it may be geared towards attracting new patients. Some sites may want to emphasise patient education, certain dental products or treatment philosophies. Online appointment booking has also become a popular service, but remember that people still have to actively seek out your site.

DIY

If you are up for a challenge, you can create the practice website yourself. This entails a fair bit of work learning about HTML ('web language') and multimedia presentation. There are thousands of websites on the Internet that have been designed to guide

you through this process, and a wide range of software can be used to write the web pages including:

- Notepad (supplied with Windows, can be used to write simple pages in HTML)
- Word (which will 'translate' most straightforward Word documents into HTML)
- Free or inexpensive authoring programs such as AceHTML Freeware² or Coffee Cup's HTML Code/Visual Editor³ (\$49)
- Professional authoring packages, such as Macromedia's Dreamweaver⁴ which will do everything very well, but has a steep learning curve (and costs almost £400).*

Another route to creating a simple practice website is to use a website content

management service. One drawback is the lack of templates suitable for a dental practice. Many of the American sites have outdated designs; however, Moonfruit,⁵ a UK site, has excellent templates that can easily be adjusted for dental use. The site offers a 14-day free trial and after that, the 'lite' version costs £26.99 a year and allows you to create one website with an unlimited number of pages, up to a maximum of 40MB.

Bring in the professionals

If the thought of becoming a web whizz brings you out in a cold sweat, fear not, as you can always outsource. The first option is to use a dental website design company to build a site for you based on a selection of different designs. They would also normally find you a suitable domain name (web address) and host the site for you (this means your website files will be kept on a special computer, called a web server).

The second option is to use a web design company to produce a bespoke website for you from scratch. If you're aiming for a unique look to your website using the latest technology, then this may be the route for you. Prices vary enormously depending on your requirements and who you hire – but basically you get what you pay for. See Table 1 for a list of companies and the services they offer.

Gather information

The next step to building your practice website is of course to choose the content, which normally takes the form of text and images. Think of the sort of information your prospective patient would want to find from your site. On your homepage you may want to include a brief introduction to the practice and a staff or practice photo. Take a look at other websites for inspiration, and remember that your website needn't be too complex – just a few pages will be enough to give patients your location and an idea of services and costs. Think of it as you would any promotional material for your practice – only more dynamic. Try to keep text straightforward and free of jargon. The Plain English Campaign has a handy free software download on their website called 'Drivel Defence', specifically designed to check website text.⁶

If you're outsourcing, many companies will be happy to base your website on the information contained within your practice information leaflet; provide them with the original text as a Word document and images in graphic format if you have them.

Most people have access to a digital camera or will be able to scan some existing photographs. Run an Internet search on 'image optimisation' to find out how to create images that will load faster from your website. There are many websites that provide free images for personal non-commercial use.^{7,8}

Essential content

According to the Electronic Commerce Regulations 2002, dental practice websites should include the following details:

- The name and address of the practice/s
- The email address, telephone and fax numbers of the practice/s
- The name of each dentist at the practice, their professional qualifications and country of qualification
- Information about professional registration, including the dentist's GDC number, the address and contact details of the GDC and a link to the GDC website
- A reference that the dentist(s) adheres to the rules governing the profession (ie the GDC *Standards for dental professionals*)
- There must be no comparison in the description of care given at the practice and at others or of skills or qualifications of dentists at the practice and at other practices
- All changes in practice circumstances must be reflected in the website within one month of the change taking place (eg

changes in dentists working in the practice)

- Sites must make it clear when the page was last updated.

Other guidelines to follow include only using the title 'specialist' if that member of staff is on a specialist register; making sure that links to other websites are relevant and that they are websites where you are sure the information is correct; indicating whether or not the practice sees NHS patients; maintaining patient confidentiality; and ensuring that any advertisements are legal, decent and truthful.

A guideline which is sometimes overlooked is the need to consider disabled users (see www.drc-gb.org), for example the visually impaired. Suggestions include having a text equivalent for every non-text element of your website, and ensuring that foreground and background colour combinations are sufficiently contrasting (for those who are red-green colour blind).

Register your domain name

For a professional image, a dental practice should really register their own domain name, for example www.cosmeticteeth.co.uk. The registration process is very quick and easy; just go to a site such as www.simply.com, type in your proposed domain name to check that it has not already been taken, register the name and pay. Prices for a .uk domain



Fig. 1 Time spent in planning the overall design and navigation for a website is time well spent



are about £3 a year and a .com address about £9 a year. Prices normally include website and email forwarding; this means that when a patient types your web address into a web browser, the address will automatically be redirected to wherever your pages are stored.

Create the design

So you have your content all ready to go, and your domain name, so the next stage is to think about the overall design of the website. If you are using a template, this will simply be a decision about how many pages you require and which template, colour scheme and font best suits your practice image. If you are creating the site from scratch, then it is best to start with pencil and paper and draw out some ideas based on other websites (not necessarily dental) that you like the look of and you feel would really work with your content (Fig. 1). You can then communicate this to your web designer or start developing the first page yourself if you have chosen the DIY route with suitable software.

Navigation

Ease of movement around the site is one of the most important features of a successful website. The homepage should contain links to other pages on the website and these linked pages should contain a route back to the homepage – particularly as users might be taken straight to one of these pages from a search engine and want to see the homepage. A clean, simple overall design is most desirable, with clearly visible links and pages that load easily so that the user does not lose interest and move away from the site.

A host with the most

If hosting (where your website files are kept on a server) is not provided by your website designer, another option is to use the free web space that Internet Service Providers (ISPs – the company you subscribe to for Internet access, such as AOL, BT or Tiscali) include as part of their membership. The total file size allowed is normally more than adequate for the average dental practice website. The completed website files are uploaded to the host

web server. Most ISPs will direct you to a web page that enables you to upload these files to your web space.

Marketing your masterpiece

Once your website has gone live on the Internet, you will of course need to make its presence known to existing and new patients. You could do this by including the site address on leaflets, posters, newsletters, the Yellow Pages, press releases, letter headed paper, appointment cards, receipts and so on. Or you could register your details on an online business directory such as yell.com or dentalguide.co.uk, to target people who are actively searching for a dental practice online. You can register with some of these directories for free, but it is up to you to sign up.

Another way to get your website seen is to pay for it to appear on the first page of results in a search engine. This means that your website will appear above or alongside the list of results for the keywords you are interested in, for example 'dentist', 'cosmetic', 'implants', 'Essex', etc. Google, one of the most popular

search engines, runs a scheme called Google Adwords where you only pay when a person clicks on your advert.⁹

Monitoring usage

Hosting services and ISPs usually provide statistics about the websites they host as part of the package. This is useful to find out how many visitors you have had to your website, which pages they visited and for how long, how often they returned to the site and so on. You could ask your patients how they heard about your practice and keep a monthly record, to see how your website is doing. Their feedback should also be helpful if you decide to make improvements to your site, and a reminder to keep all the information on your website up-to-date.

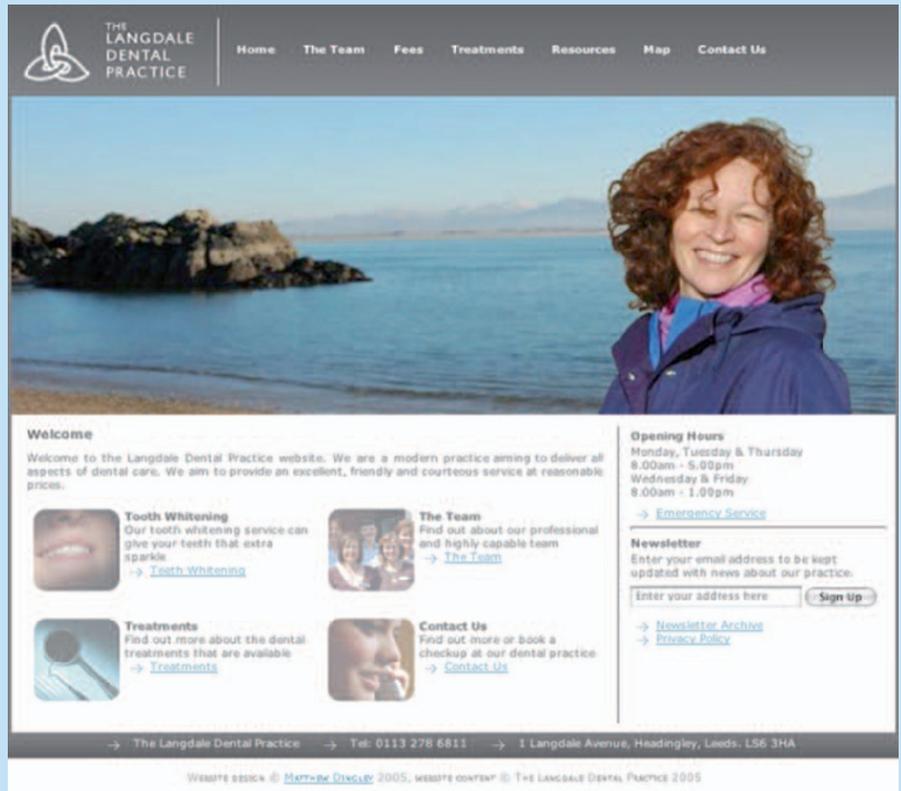
Reaping the rewards

Pictured here are a few examples of dental practice websites already out there pulling in the patients. Make sure your website is up there with the best of them!

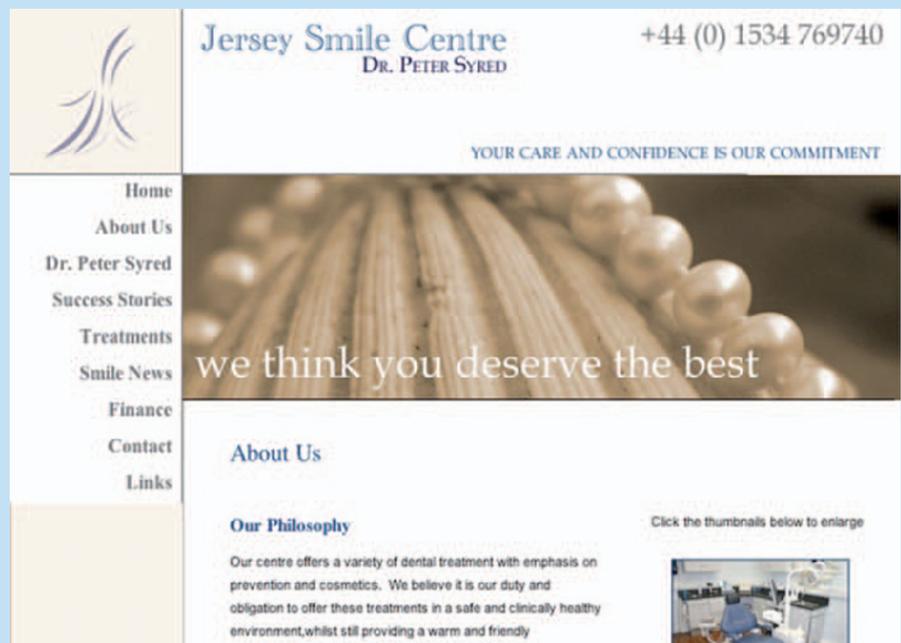
1. Downes P K. Creating a practice website. *Br Dent J* 2007; **202**: 597-604.
2. AceHTML website design software. <http://freeware.acehtml.com/>
3. Coffee Cup website design software. <http://www.coffeecup.com/>
4. Adobe Macromedia software products. <http://www.adobe.com/uk/products>
5. Moonfruit online SiteMaker. <http://www.moonfruit.com/>
6. The Plain English Campaign Drivel Defence software. <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/DrivelDefence.html>
7. Yotophoto. <http://yotophoto.com/>
8. Getty Images. <http://creative.gettyimages.com/>
9. Google Adwords. <http://www.google.com/ads/>

*Training centres across the UK offer courses in Dreamweaver. Web training experts Academy Class (www.academyclass.co.uk) are pleased to offer *Vital* readers a 20% discount on the usual cost (£697+VAT) of their 3-day Dreamweaver training course. Telephone 0800 043 8889 for more information and quote 'Vital'.

Are you a practice manager or other DCP with recent experience of commissioning a new website for your practice? If so, Vital would love to hear how it went and what advice you would give others as a result of the process. Contact vitaleditorial@nature.com.



Homepage 1 www.langdaledentists.co.uk. Principal Dr Anne Milarvie says, 'Our website is without doubt a worthwhile investment! What is important to me is the number of real people who contact us through the website. The downside of this is the commitment to answering their query; the upside is that it translates into new business. You can track the number of hits that you get on the website and there is no doubt that it attracts patients to the practice.'



Homepage 2 www.jerseysmilecentre.com. Practice Manager Melina Syred says, 'The colours in our website are our office/clinic colours and are designed to be calming. We have had many new patients as a direct "hit" from our website. We have even had a patient come over from France for implant treatment. Our feedback from existing patients is that it really gives a true reflection of our clinic. I try to update the website on a regular basis with some new "Food for thought" items.'

Table 1 Details of the services provided by various website design companies who create sites for dental practices. This information was taken from their websites and was correct on 16 March 2007

Dental website design company	Features	Costs
Admor http://www.admor.co.uk/	Up to five pages Can add your own logo to the template Will help in writing copy Includes one free change per month Search engine registration	£611 package includes the first year's hosting and two free email addresses £25 for two years domain name registration £216 per year for hosting
Dental Community http://www.dentalcommunity.co.uk/	Up to seven pages Scanning and image manipulation of photos Unlimited updates to the dental team page Unlimited minor text changes	£250 set up fee £300 per year for hosting, domain name and maintenance Unlimited email addresses Extra pages are £75-£90 each
Dental Design Limited http://www.dental-design.co.uk/	Links to many examples of their work can be found on their website Offer a content management system (CMS) for people who want to update their own site Offer many Internet marketing strategies	Prices on application Website management and search engine optimisation are charged at £50 per month
Dental-Focus http://www.dental-focus.com/	Links to many examples of their work can be found on their website Offer many Internet marketing strategies	Prices on application
Practice Box (Dentsure Ltd) http://www.practicebox.com/	Includes choice of 12 animated introductions Assistance with adding photos Subscriber makes text changes themselves Search engine optimisation Free poster and leaflets to promote website	£620 per year for comprehensive website (up to 35 pages), hosting and domain name registration for co.uk. and .com £255 per year for budget website (up to seven pages), hosting and co.uk domain Also offer a bespoke design service
PracticeGenie from Wrigley (Dentsure Ltd) http://www.practicegenie.com/index.php	Service limited to Wrigley OHA members Hosted on the Wrigley PracticeGenie server, therefore web address would be similar to www.practicegenie.com/sites/12345	Free, but Wrigley Orbit advert on every page and Orbit often mentioned in the patient advice pages Can upgrade the site for £99, £299 and £499 per year
The Internet Marketing Company http://www.theinternetmarketingco.com	Various interactive features available aimed at UK small businesses	£195 activation fee and monthly fee from £25