



How to Develop a Practice Web Site

Web sites are not only a great way to market your practice. They are also an inexpensive way to disseminate patient education materials and keep connected with your patient base. With a practice web site, you can inexpensively reach anyone with a computer, no matter where they are located. But before you do, ask yourself a few questions that are addressed later in this article:

- Should you use a service that offers prepackaged web templates or should you start from scratch?
- What do you need to do to get started?
- How can you put your web site to work for you?

Prepackaged or Start from Scratch?

In general, there are two ways you can approach developing a web site. You could choose to work with a service that offers you prepackaged chiropractic web site templates, or you can choose to create your site from scratch, typically by working with a web designer. Both options have advantages and disadvantages.

Prepackaged

There are several services offering prepackaged web sites for chiropractors. The design, format, and some of the content of these web sites are already set up for you. Generally, starting with one of these will take less time and require relatively lower costs to get started. Take a look at some of the other advantages and disadvantages of this type of service:

Advantages:

- **Hosting and URL (web address) included**, which means you don't need a separate service for this.
- **Professional look**. Expert designers, writers, and chiropractic experts create the templates, so, generally speaking, you can be confident of your web site will present a professional image of your practice.
- **Personalized content**. Typically, you have options to personalize certain sections of the site with your name, logo, and often more detailed information about your practice.
- **Generalized content**. Many prepackaged sites offer chiropractic-focused content, such as answers to common questions, the history of chiropractic, health news, etc. Be sure the web site content is an accurate reflection of your chiropractic approach and philosophy.



- **Relatively low cost.** Costs range from about \$20 to \$50 per month, so prepackaged services can be affordable for doctors who are starting out. One web hosting services even currently offers a free, albeit very limited, service.
- **Easy to use.** There is no need to hire a web designer or learn new software; you simply plug your information into the template.
- **Listed on search services.** There are two types of search services to consider. The first is geared to patients seeking a chiropractor in a particular area (e.g., Chiro Find). There are also the general search engines (e.g., google, alta vista, etc.) Part of the prepackaged service includes registering your site on both the chiropractic web search engines and the general search engines. This means that whichever type of search engine a person uses to locate a chiropractor in your area, your web site is likely to be listed.
- **E-mail is included.** An e-mail address is provided as part of the hosting service (example: johndoe@topchiro.com) and you often can have your e-mail redirected to a personal e-mail account (example: johndoe@aol.com).

Disadvantages:

- **Can look "prefabricated."** It's possible that other chiropractors in your area may use the same web site template you have selected.
- **Limited customization.** Opportunities for custom wording and design may be more limited than if you set up the web site independently.

Start from Scratch

Some chiropractors like the flexibility of developing their own web sites and are willing to devote the time to do so. If you're among this group, consider working with a professional web designer. But before you do, take the time to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages, such as:

Advantages:

- **Unique.** Your site may be more unique than the web sites of other chiropractors in your community.
- **Matches your other marketing.** It may be easier to reinforce your other branding efforts. For example, you can match the fonts and colors used on your logo, sign, and brochures.



Disadvantages:

- **Must choose a hosting service and purchase a domain name.** This means you and/or your web designer must research hosting services and select and register a domain name.
- **Must hire a designer and/or learn to use software** in order to develop the site and maintain it.
- **Often time consuming.** Developing the content and design for your web site can be time consuming.
- **Expensive.** If you hire a web designer, it can be costly.
- **Must research search engines and register your name on each site.** This can be time consuming.

How to Get Started

Prepackaged

Even with a prepackaged service, there are some things to consider. Probably the most effort will be to select the appropriate service to meet your needs now and into the future.

- **Choose a provider/service.** Developing the content and design for your web site is important, but it can be time consuming. A recent Internet search found the following options available:
 - ✓ Chiroweb.com, *Dynamic Chiropractic's web site*, lets you choose from professional web designs, automatically sends patients e-mail newsletters, and provides a preferred listing in its chiropractor locator service.
 - ✓ eChiropractor.com, offered by *Structured Web eBusiness Solutions*, provides a professional online presence and offers answers to common chiropractic questions.
 - ✓ Axsen Chiropractic Web Design lets you choose between several pre-set styles, include personalize text and images, and use your own unique domain name.
 - ✓ Chiroplanet.com offers multiple pages of content already developed on chiropractic, health conditions, and wellness issues as well as a monthly health newsletter.

Pricing varies from \$15 to \$50 per month—with some services charging set-up fees as high as \$200. Be prepared to pay for the first year up front, which is usually the minimum contract length.



NOTE: The preceding list of companies does not imply an endorsement by NCMIC of the content or services provided. Before signing up with any web service, be sure to evaluate the content that is provided to ensure your web site includes information consistent with your practice philosophy and professional image.

- **Write your personalized information.** You may wish to include: a welcome message, your address, telephone number, e-mail address, directions, your name and background, practice philosophy, office hours, payment types and insurance accepted, and products and services offered.
- **Proofread.** Before you publish, carefully review all your materials to ensure accuracy. If possible, ask a friend to read your information. It's often difficult to be objective about your own information and a friend may be able to provide a fresh, unbiased look about your presentation and catch and typos and grammatical errors.

Start from Scratch—Use a Web Designer

Though this option will likely take more of time and be more costly to develop, there are definite advantages to starting from scratch. Though it is possible to set up your own web site by using software that converts regular text into HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language), unless you or your spouse is technically savvy, it's generally best to hire a professional web designer. Look for an individual who is experienced in graphics and design as well as in programming, site hosting, and technical support. Follow the steps below as you work with this individual.

- **Select a hosting service.** You will need a service to host your practice web site and display it on the Internet. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are companies that specialize in this type of service, providing the technical support, computer equipment, and back-ups to keep your site displayed for a monthly fee.

But before choosing the least expensive local hosting service, consider an ISP's:

- ✓ *Customer service rankings.*
- ✓ *Financial stability.*
- ✓ *Pricing.* If the going rate for ISPs in your area is \$49/month, and one company is offering services for \$9/month, ask yourself why.

Your web designer will be the best resource in this decision, since they probably have experience working with several ISPs/hosting services. However, since your practice will have the long-term relationship with this service, do your homework before signing any agreement.



- **Choose URL/Domain Name.** The address of your site on the Internet, your domain name, is how people will access your site. Selecting and registering a domain name is a simple and inexpensive process. You and your web designer should get a domain name before developing the content for your site by:
 - ✓ *Visiting a registration web site* such as www.register.com.
 - ✓ *Following the steps to register your domain name.* Have several options ready, because your first choice may be taken.
 - ✓ *Securing your domain name.* Currently, the cost is \$75 to protect your domain name for 12 months. Try to have your name followed by a .com. There are other options such as .net and .org, but many people will assume your site is a .com. Select a name that is easy to remember and spell.

- **Write content/develop flow chart.** As you write your personalized information, you may wish to include some information about you and your practice such as: a welcome message, your address, telephone number, e-mail address, directions, your name and background, practice philosophy, office hours, payment types and insurance accepted, and products and services offered. In addition, you may decide to use your web site as an opportunity to educate people in your community about chiropractic. If so, make sure to research this information thoroughly.

To ensure your information links together the way you want it to, develop a flow chart. This flow chart also will help you in the future, should you decide to expand your site.

- **Design the site's graphics and pages.** As you and/or your web designer develop the site's graphics and design, remember that "less is more." Most professional web designers select a color scheme and stick with it throughout the site. Also, select graphics that convey a positive image of your practice.
 - ✓ *Keep it simple and accurate.* Information on your site should be easy to find and quick to read. Typos make your practice appear unprofessional. Avoid complex graphics that slow download time.
 - ✓ *Make the information on your site easy to find.*
 - ✓ *Keep it up to date.* Your web site must be kept up-to-date to look professional. Regularly post news from around the office, patient success stories (with their permission), or a short note from you.
- **Proofread.** Before you publish, carefully review all your materials to ensure accuracy. If possible, ask a friend to read your information. It's often difficult to be objective about your own information and a friend may be able to provide a fresh, unbiased look about your presentation and as catch and typos.



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- **Publish.** Before you publish your site (release it “live” on the Internet), view it in several different web browsers such as Internet Explorer, Netscape, and AOL to verify that it actually appears the way you intended it to. If not, go back and make any necessary changes before patients, prospective patients, business associates, and chiropractic colleagues view your web site. Also, it’s a good idea to review how the site appears in earlier versions of each browser, since many people still use older equipment and software.
- **Register on search engines.** When someone conducts a search on “google” or another search engine for a chiropractor in your area, will your practice name and web site appear? Your web designer can register with each search engine, providing “key words” to search by and a short description of your practice. Make sure your description is brief and to the point, since only minimal information is usually displayed.

Putting Your Web Site to Work for You

Unfortunately, having a web site does not guarantee you visitors. To get the most out of your Internet investment, you must tell people about your site and put the power of the Internet to work for your practice. Here’s how:

Promote the site name. Put your web site address on brochures, stationary, business cards, yellow page ads, and new patient kits.

- **Introduce your site.** Send a letter to your patients announcing the launch of your site and list the information they can access on the site. Invite patients to visit the site and give you their feedback.
- **Send e-mail site updates.** Ask for patient e-mail addresses just like you ask for phone numbers. When the site is updated, send an e-mail announcement to your patients. Don’t forget to include a link to your site in the e-mail. A note of caution: Be aware of patient confidentiality. Make sure your patients grant you permission to contact them via e-mail. It is important from a privacy standpoint that you do not provide these names to any other group without your patients’ permission.
- **Respond to feedback.** Your site should include an e-mail form so visitors can give you feedback. Respond to each e-mail message within 24 hours. Or set up an automatic response, if you think you will take longer.



- **Exercise care in providing “advice” on the web site** to patients and non-patients who visit your web site. Patients who rely upon your advice may have a future claim if the advice causes them harm. Web site information must be kept generic.
- **Be flexible.** If you can’t afford an online appointment system, offer patients the ability to e-mail their appointment preferences. Then, respond with a confirmation e-mail.
- **Use your web site to build your practice.** Incorporate e-mail and your web site into your practice recall system, to contact patients you haven’t seen in a while, or to encourage referrals. Take advantage of the fact that your web site is available even when you may not be to keep your practice in front of your patients and prospects.

What’s Next?

Your web site is just one of several ways to market your practice. Make sure to approach your practice’s marketing strategically and integrate your web site with your other practice marketing efforts.

A web site should be created after you’ve established your practice’s mission and positioning statements and developed materials to start up your practice. (If you haven’t developed these materials, see these articles on StartingIntoPractice.com.) Then use the following articles for ideas to extend your marketing.

- “Media Releases”
- “Print Advertising”
- “Developing Your Practice Brochure”
- “Print Advertising”
- “New Patient Orientation”
- “Planning a Grand Opening”
- “Community Involvement”
- “Yellow Pages Advertising”
- “Community Education and Public Speaking”