



The Worst Mistakes Healthcare Organizations Make When Trying to Attract Patients From the Internet

Prepared by
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With over 80% of the American population now turning to the Web for healthcare information, Internet marketing has the power to attract patients and grow revenues for your hospital, practice or other healthcare-related organization.

So why aren't prospective patients calling you in droves?

Today's Internet is too competitive to simply launch a website without a clear marketing strategy. First, people need to be able to find you. Once they do, you'll need to motivate them to call you. Both objectives are harder to do than you can imagine.

This report highlights the biggest mistakes we see healthcare organizations making online. Their failures provide you with an incredible opportunity to break away from the pack and own the online attention of your local audience.

So use this report as a guide to convert an underutilized marketing vehicle into one that effectively builds your brand, your patient base and, ultimately, your revenues.

Mistake One: No clear marketing objective

All too often, healthcare providers rush to the tactic (creating a website) without ever defining their marketing objectives. Are you looking to attract patients, promote new service lines, grow revenues, build volume for specific types of cases, enhance your reputation, educate patients, allow patients to schedule their own appointments, facilitate patient emails, establish your brand or a combination of these?

For nearly all healthcare organizations, the primary goal is for new visitors to make appointments, or at least call for information. In order to get visitors to that point, you need to differentiate your facility from the competition and persuade them you have the answer to their needs with a compelling, benefit-laden message that tells your unique story.

No focus = no message = no results. Build your site (and social media pages) for a specific target audience and create content that speaks to their needs. You don't need to say everything to everybody. Understand exactly WHO you are talking to and maintain that focus in terms of content, graphic design, functionality and structure.

Mistake Two: Focusing on the wrong features

When developing a website, it's easy to focus on what it looks like and forget what it is supposed to be doing. Of course it needs to be graphically appealing and technically correct, but simply putting pretty packaging around your portfolio of services and credentials is a recipe for failure.

Sexy technologies like Flash-animated introductions and slideshows are alluring, but often turn out to be beautiful failures, distracting the visitor from the message. What's more, technologies like Flash can seriously impair your search engine visibility.

Before you do anything else on the Internet, focus on the elements that will deliver results.

- **Benefit-driven headlines:** You have only a few seconds to capture attention, so your headline has to make a promise that gets the reader into the first paragraph of copy.
- **Sales-driven copy:** Give your audience a reason why they should choose your healthcare organization. Make sure your writer uses conversational language, has a "you" orientation, uses active voice, etc.

- **Relevant, educational content:** Populate your site with unique and educational content that is relevant to your specific audience; therefore, talk about the specific services your organization offers. (Though beware: too much clinical content can overwhelm and confuse visitors.) When you provide information that is novel and helpful, people will be more likely to trust you, and even share it with their friends and family.
- **Motivating graphic content:** Create a layout that considers where the eye flows naturally and make sure that it leads to the most important content on the page. When using graphics, make sure they add value and are not taking up valuable “real estate.”
- **Landing pages:** Develop special pages that direct behavior and capture searches from search engines and inbound links from across the Internet. These may include pages on special services you provide, white papers or even products you sell.
- **Calls to action:** Include a call to action on every single page, telling your audience what you want them to do (i.e. call for an appointment). This information should be available, obvious, inviting, easy and encouraging. Ideally, place it “above the fold” (the top part of the page) so the visitor doesn’t have to scroll down to see it.
- **Offers:** Add special offers or discounts that encourage the visitor to act now rather than later.
- **Proof:** Website pages with before and after photos and/or written patient testimonials are highly viewed by visitors especially in regard to healthcare. They are also very powerful in helping persuade patients to call you.
- **Video:** Video is creating an online revolution. People love to watch video online. It is easier than reading lots of text, because it’s visual and fun. Video works particularly well for patient testimonials, “meet the doctor” segments, hospital or practice overviews, introducing and promoting new service lines and sometimes education. It also helps with search (more on that below.)
- **SEO friendly:** Use the keywords or important “tags” that visitors are most likely to search for in your headlines and throughout your copy, without sacrificing the quality of the writing.
- **Intuitive structure and navigation:** Getting around on your site should feel easy, natural or intuitive. Don’t let the mechanics of navigation become a barrier to communicating the message. Sites that make it difficult to find important information or navigate from page to page or back to the main page drive visitors away in frustration. Consistency makes a site easier to use – when menus and navigation appear at the same place on each page and links are obvious.
- **Online scheduling and email:** As applicable, offering patients a way to schedule appointments online can be a tangible benefit. In a nationwide study by the Pew Research Center, 62% of respondents were interested in both booking or changing medical appointments online and getting text message reminders.

Mistake Three: Ignoring your website after its launch

A website is definitely not a “set-and-forget” marketing tool. And yet we see hospitals, practices, and even healthcare manufacturers, all the time that spend good money to be online and then turn their attention away.

Whether it’s due to a lack of knowledge, no dedicated staff, or an insufficient budget, ignoring your website and failing to refresh your online content after the initial launch is nearly as counterproductive as not having a website at all.

Here are four top reasons to do it now.

- **Regular updates help win and maintain high visibility with search engines.** When people in need are searching online for healthcare help, you want them to find your site among the top results. Sites that change regularly get more notice by search engines (think Google), and do better in the ranking system. Over 80% of visitors come through searches, so search engine visibility is the gateway to attracting new visitors.
- **You stay relevant to current and prospective patients.** It's not difficult to maintain a fresh, connected and relevant face to your target audience. It lets site visitors know that you are tuned-in to their needs and that you have effective answers for them. Conversely, static content leaves the impression that there's nothing fresh or valuable for the people who you want to reach and serve.
- **Being quick to shift gears as needed is critical to success.** As with any marketing tool, make changes according to how well your website is performing in the marketplace. Measure what's working and adjust for maximum return on investment.
- **It's easy, inexpensive and profitable to keep your site fresh.** Updating online content does not take a lot of effort and is highly beneficial. These days you can get "content management" websites where you can upload new pages yourself, without having to go through a website designer. And if you don't have the staff in-house to get the writing job done, hire experts to do it for you. Their work should easily pay for itself.

Mistake Four: Believing your audience will find you on its own

It's a mistake to think that your audience is going to find you on the first page of the search results simply because you have a website. Remember, EVERYONE wants to be on top of Google.

Sadly, with your competition's pay-per-click ads and review sites like Yelp often getting listing priority, some provider websites are hard to find, *even when patients are looking for it by name!* So if that is the case for you, priority one is to fix that.

However, the real rewards will come when your site is optimized to capture prospective new patients typing in "keywords" like children's hospital, outpatient surgery, cancer care, robotic surgery, or cardiovascular care. That way prospective patients who don't know your organization will find you.

You have two primary options for optimizing your online presence for search engines: Pay-per-click (PPC) and Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

Pay-Per-Click: PPC involves creating targeted keyword-rich ads and paying to have them placed near the top of the search page when someone searches for specific keywords. PPC offers several huge advantages:

1. You can get on top of search engines (Google, Yahoo!, Bing, AOL, et al) almost immediately
2. You can target specific keyword phrases that users are searching for
3. You can send traffic to the pages you want (to your oncology or cardiology page, for example, instead of your home page)

Of course, pay-per-click means you pay every time someone clicks on your ad, whether or not they ever contact you.

In some areas it's become so competitive that PPC is almost cost-prohibitive. Generally you will pay \$0.10 to \$5 each time someone clicks on your ad; but for the most expensive keywords (e.g., mesothelioma) in more competitive markets, trial lawyers have bid the cost per click up to \$100.

Therefore, if you decide to use PPC, you will be more successful if you hire an expert who understands the many nuances of the pay-per-click world. You can control your price per click and set daily and monthly maximums so you never go over your PPC budget. The expert will evaluate hundreds of keywords, prioritize them by relevance, select local geography, choose days and times to run the ads, get ads written and direct them to appropriate pages on your website, making sure your website has what it takes to convert clicks to inquiries. They can track results and adjust the PPC campaign based on results on an ongoing basis.

If you do decide to test pay-per-click advertising, set a monthly budget (often between \$1,000-\$5,000 per month), and test for at least three months. If your efforts generate a positive return on investment, continue to fund on an ongoing basis from profits. If not, either make substantive changes or cancel.

SEO: Some people call SEO “pray for click” because while the search engines don’t charge you, there is no guarantee that even the best use of keywords, page titles, descriptions and inbound links will get your website onto the first few pages of results.

Search engines, such as Google and Yahoo, are continuously changing their algorithms for placement in order to make it difficult to scam their system. This makes it a very time consuming and labor intensive exercise, keeping up with the newest theories in SEO. Additionally, you are competing with millions of websites across the Internet that may be using similar keywords to compete for the same front page position.

The advantage of using SEO is that your position is earned and therefore has more credibility. Therefore, we always recommend using SEO with PPC for maximum results.

When evaluating your own website for SEO, make sure it’s strong in the following five areas:

- **Keywords are king:** Keywords are the significant words or phrases that are noticed and indexed by Search Engines. Make sure you include the keywords that patients search for throughout your headlines, copy, “tags” and navigation. But don’t overuse them. Keyword-laden copy still needs to motivate, and to do that it has to be written well.
- **Spiders notice change:** Search Engines are constantly searching, but they don’t waste time looking at what they’ve already seen (and indexed). Regular changes in a website have value for both visitors and search engine spiders, so update your content regularly.
- **Text with images:** Spiders are blind to images, artwork or videos. So you’ve got to use text to reveal content to spiders. Use appropriate keyword rich tags and captions with photos and other visuals.
- **Videos on your site:** Videos not only appeal to your website visitors, they help boost page rank. Like other content, videos need to be original and relevant to your specific audience.

By the way, a “dirty little secret” of SEO is that websites can be made “search engine friendly” while it is being created. Unfortunately, most designers know nothing about SEO, so someone else has to retrofit it later – at considerable expense.

At our seminars, we use the analogy, “That’s like buying a car, then paying someone to cut the roof off it. It is better and cheaper to buy a convertible in the first place.”

- **SEO Offsite:** Your website becomes more discoverable when your content is linked to by other websites or comments in social media. But be careful to nurture legitimate, relevant links. Some companies advertise linking services that come from unrelated websites all over the world and can hurt your credibility.

Good sources for linking include patients, local businesses and community sites, press releases, published articles, social media comments, physician review sites, blogs and directories. Different links carry different weight. For instance, a single link from a New York Times article can be worth thousands of links from unknown sites. The more valuable links you have, the more credible it looks to Google and other search engines.

Mistake Five: Not optimizing your website for mobile devices

There has been a surge in the use of mobile devices to access online content. Six in ten adults use their smart phones, laptops or tablets to view websites and social media sites, text and email. Any future changes you make to your website should include user interface improvements that function well on smart phones or digital notepads.

Having a mobile device strategy puts you ahead of the curve and is especially effective with certain demographics. 85% of those 18 to 29 go online wirelessly. Not surprisingly, those with higher incomes and educations are using smart phones; and African Americans and Latinos also have higher than average usage rates, possibly because smart phones are less expensive than computers. Currently 25% of those with smart phones say they use them as their main source for online access (42% of those 18-29) and that number is expected to increase.

While use of mobile for healthcare is still a relatively novel concept, prepare for innovative changes, such as disseminating routine and crisis public relations announcements, providing location-based information, posting ER wait times, texting appointment reminders and sending updates from the OR to waiting families and friends.

Mistake Six: Handling inquiries from your website improperly

While this is not a reflection of your online presence, poorly handled inquiries that come from your website will have a significant impact on the success of your online marketing campaign.

Our research shows that at least 50% of callers from the Internet are lost at the front desk. Losing just two of these callers a day can result in a huge loss of income. For example, if your average patient stay is \$15,000 and you lose just one call a day for 250 business days, that represents almost \$4,000,000 in lost revenues!

Set your front desk or calling center up to win! Nothing is more important than an inquiry. Assign your best phone people to do the job and provide them with scripts and training to do it well. Consider incentives for each new patient acquired.

Mistake Seven: Failure to track results

If you treat your website like a business expense, it's unlikely you'll get the budget to make it the income generator it could be. And yet by not tracking results, you are doing just that because you have nothing to quantify your return on investment.

Today it is so easy to track the effectiveness of your website and make adjustments as necessary to improve results. Install a special tracking telephone number that is used only for inquiries that come from the Internet. Each call will be auto-forwarded to your regular office line. This allows real time computer reporting that tracks who has called, when they call and how long the phone call lasts. You can set each call up to be recorded, as long as you include an announcement to the effect of "your call may be recorded for quality assurance." (Your attorney can guide you on how to avoid HIPAA issues.)

When calls do not result in patient appointments, you can use the recordings for staff training.

Mistake Eight: Not sending emails to your patient base

One of the benefits of having a website or social media presence is that it gives you a convenient tool for building a mailing list of prospective patients. Yet most healthcare providers fail to collect this information.

A simple email signup form on the home page (as well as on your patient intake forms, postcards and other communications) can provide you with an email list of motivated prospects. The most effective signup forms include some kind of incentive, such as a gift card (e.g., Starbucks card) or special report, that encourages visitors to join your list.

Your program should include an automated response that sends out an email immediately with a welcome message or overview of the kind of information they can expect in the coming weeks or months. This will encourage readers to maintain their subscription, even after they've received your incentive.

What can you do with email once you have this audience?

- **Generate patient referrals**
- **Improve recalls**
- **Retain patients**
- **Sell products and services**
- **Educate patients**

Once you have your email program set up, you can track its results, monitoring how many people open your emails, click on specific links, visit your website, share content or make appointments online. You can use this feedback to determine what types of information your audience responds to best and make improvements as needed.

Mistake Nine: Failure to use social media properly

Social media has become an integral communication tool for many healthcare organizations. It provides a great way to build connections and communities. But the mistake people make is to fall for the shiny light before they have all other basics in place. They think that because everyone is doing it and it's "free" they should participate, without considering their strategy and the costs in time and other resources.

Social media should not be considered unless you have already maximized the effectiveness of your website and are clear on how you're going to integrate it into your overall marketing plan. Consider in advance how much time you can dedicate to your social networks so you can engage in them consistently, and establish clear rules that govern your interactions.

There are several ways you can participate in social media, some more time consuming than others:

- **As a listener:** Social media can be used as a way to learn what your audience wants to know, helping you improve and update the content on your website. You can start by reading the questions and comments on major healthcare sites such as WebMD, ShareCare, PatientsLikeMe or medical association websites. Or use tools like GoogleAlerts or SocialMention to see what specific health topics are trending.
- **As an expert:** Within your organization you may have surgeons, nurses, physical therapists, social workers or other staff members with great patient care stories to tell (within the boundaries of HIPAA laws.) If you don't already have one in place consider initiating a blog, allowing readers to post their comments and questions. This is a simple form of social media and allows you to create and interact with a local community of followers. You can also guest blog on other medical websites, which works well if you don't have time to blog regularly. Guest posts provide links back to your website. You can also provide health and wellness experts from your physician roster to answer questions on many health networks. YouTube is the place to be if you want to share videos and want to establish yourself as an expert in certain specialty areas.

- **As a news source:** Use Twitter to feed interesting articles, blog posts and news to your followers. Because of its brevity, Twitter isn't a great medium for content, although some hospitals, for example, have benefited from the surgeries their doctors tweet about.
- **As a community:** Facebook has the potential to provide you with a wider audience, but be aware that they may be more interested in your subject matter than your services. In order to localize your followers, make your content specific to your regional audience. Consider running contests that involve cross-promotion with local healthcare-related businesses. Remember that some medical specialties lend themselves more to Facebook than others. OB/GYNs, pediatricians and refractive surgeons can do well, whereas colorectal surgery and urology practices generally will not. Plus, if you are promoting a hospital, some of departments may be well served to have their own Facebook pages in addition to what you may do for the facility itself.
- **As a networker:** LinkedIn provides one of the best opportunities to network with other healthcare professionals. There are specific groups established for every category of professional, including healthcare marketing topics.

Mistake Ten: Marketing by committee

Marketing by committee is always a problem for any organization, but it can be particularly problematic when it comes to getting a website done or an Internet marketing campaign launched.

Everyone seems to have an opinion and demand real estate for their pet cause. Unless you have a strong outside partner helping you, your designer will probably try to please everyone by “caving” into all their input, even if much of that input is misguided.

In that event the process will take forever, and the final product will be the famous “camel that was a horse designed by committee.”

Mistake Eleven: Concentrating too much on the “look” of your website

As we have seen, there are many issues beyond graphics to consider when getting your website created and online campaign launched. (The designer should actually be one of the last people involved.)

At a minimum, effective Internet marketing requires someone to create the strategy, a writer (the unheralded real hero), someone to manage the process and a designer. Depending on the situation, you may also need talents from programmers, search engine optimization experts, pay-per-click specialists, videographers, social media gurus and more.

Normally it makes the most sense to hire a firm with a track record in healthcare, website design and Internet marketing. That way, you can get all the expertise you need in one, coordinated team.

Call Healthcare Success Strategies if you need help turning your Internet Marketing program around.

These eleven mistakes are the most common ones we see in our work with hospitals, practices and other healthcare organizations around the country.

If you need help, we would be happy to critique your current website and discuss these and other common mistakes. Healthcare Success Strategies can guide your Internet marketing as we have done for countless other providers around the nation, providing ethical, creative and best practices marketing strategies.

For the websites we create and host for our clients, we upload your design changes up to two hours per month at no extra charge, just to assure that the site keeps producing. We can also design your site so that you can write and create new pages of content yourself.

As needed, we can provide professional talent, skilled at SEO, pay-per-click and social media. Additionally, we can measure, quantify and evaluate the performance of your website and other online marketing efforts so that real-time adjustments can be made to increase their performance and profitability.

At Healthcare Success Strategies, we understand what works and what doesn't work in healthcare marketing and advertising. We know how to effectively communicate your value to your various audiences in ways that help them appreciate and utilize all that you have to offer.

Our goal is to help you make your online efforts both reputation-enhancing and profitable. Call us to find out more at (800) 656-0907.

