

# Practice Management

## Creating a Web Presence to Raise Awareness of Urgent Care

**Urgent message:** A robust—and effective—advertising campaign needs to take full advantage of all available media, with special consideration of online opportunities.

Alan A. Ayers, MBA, MAcc

In the past, advertising was a simple proposition; nearly everyone watched the same network television, read the same city newspapers, and searched for businesses in the Yellow Pages. But in recent years, such “mass marketing” has yielded to new marketing channels targeting the lifestyles and interests of narrowly defined user segments.

Today, consumers seek information on their own terms—through conventional media, on the Internet, and using handheld devices. To raise awareness and increase visits to your urgent care center, you should consider ways to integrate such “new media” with conventional advertising tactics.

### Consumer Behavior in the Internet Age

According to a recent Gallup Poll, 82% of Americans are Internet users while 48% are “frequent” users—defined as spending at least an hour per day online.<sup>1</sup> What’s significant to urgent care operators is not just that people are using the Internet, but rather, exactly *who’s* online.



© iStockPhoto.com/Amanda Rohde

Consumers age 18 to 49, with a college or post-graduate education, and employed with above-average personal incomes make up the bulk of frequent Internet users. These demographics coincide with high urgent care utilization and are most likely to both search for information on the Internet and also be influenced by blogs, reviews posted by other patients, and the advice of online “friends.” Web-savvy and highly focused, younger consumers tend to shut out mass media such as television, radio, and news-

papers and also pay less attention to online banner and pop-up ads, which they view as “noise.”

While Gallup classifies about 45% of consumers age 50 to 64 (Baby Boomers) as “frequent” Internet users—a figure slightly less than for younger generations—Baby Boomers are actually more likely to view the Internet as an information source than younger counterparts. Younger consumers spend more time online for social interaction like instant messaging, locating old friends, and sharing photographs, whereas

**Table 1. Information to Include in an Urgent Care Center Website**

■ Center name	■ Physician bios (including photographs)
■ Street address	■ Pictures of exterior and interior of facility
■ Phone number	■ News and announcements
■ Map and description of location	■ Information on special promotions
■ Operating hours (including holidays)	■ Registration forms
■ Detailed list of services	■ HIPAA Notice of Privacy Practices
■ Detailed list of insurance plans accepted	■ Financial policy and billing practices
■ Pricing for uninsured patients and ancillary services	■ Frequently asked questions

Baby Boomers spend more time on transactions like paying bills, trading stocks, and making travel plans. Although Baby Boomers still pay attention to conventional media, they see the Internet as a vast information repository that can answer such questions as whether an urgent care center is near an out-of-town hotel or accepts their health insurance. Thus, they are also more likely than younger generations to pay attention to online advertising.

How much to invest in an Internet strategy requires understanding an urgent care center's target market—is it younger or older?—as well as its information search habits.

### Yellow Pages vs. Internet

Many urgent care operators believe a large Yellow Pages ad is the key to marketing success—and in some communities, they are correct. In resort areas with a large number of travelers and senior adults, for example, the Yellow Pages are often the first place consumers turn to find an urgent care center. But an evaluation of overall Yellow Page advertising trends indicates it's not the commonly used resource it once was.

Total Yellow Page ad spending in 2009 matched that of 1998<sup>2</sup> and between 2009 and 2013, ad spending in print directories is expected to decline 39%.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the number of U.S. Internet users is growing at a constant rate of 7% per year, with the largest increases occurring among adults age 55 and older.<sup>4</sup>

As consumers switch to wireless phones and hand-

held devices, not only is a thick phone book not portable, but it generally covers only one metropolitan area—rendering it useless when out-of-town. In addition, the user of a city phone directory has to ascertain how close each advertiser is to his or her location. An ad won't drive business if a provider is not convenient. For a single urgent care center in a large city, it's simply an inefficient use of advertising dollars to reach consumers beyond a three- to five-mile radius of the center.

By contrast, Internet search engines can pinpoint a consumer's exact location, provide a listing of centers in order of proximity, and then deliver that information to the user's laptop or handheld device—wherever they might be.

Because Yellow Pages are updated only once per year and consumers may not always have the current edition, a start-up center depending on Yellow Page advertising might wait a year or longer before the investment drives any patient visits. Annual publication also means a center cannot add or retract outdated information such as hours or insurance plans accepted.

The “new media” equivalent of a Yellow Pages ad—and the starting place for establishing an Internet “presence”—is to have a clean and crisp website.

### A Professionally Designed Website

A website serves as both a “landing page” for consumers utilizing search engines to find an urgent care center and as a point of reference for conventional and “new media” advertising.

No different than exterior signage and interior design, an urgent care center's website represents its brand. Although inexpensive software is available to build a simple website, such websites usually lack the “polish” of a professionally-designed website. Common problems of amateur websites include:

- Unattractive pages. The structure of a webpage, fonts, colors, and images should draw consumers further into the site.
- Complicated interface. When consumers land on a website, it should be clear where to click for the information they're looking for, such as operating hours or a map to the center. Consumers will navigate away from websites they can't fig-

**Table 2. Ways to Increase Visibility of an Urgent Care Center Website**

- Submit the website address directly to major Internet search engines like Google, Yahoo, and MSN.
- Use “metatags” to embed keywords that increase the likelihood the website will be picked by search engine “crawlers” and achieve a higher retrieval ranking in web searches.
- Ask credible websites that are already listed in search engines to include a link to your site, including those of organizations you sponsor and companies you do business with. Also consult any websites listing your competition.
- List your website address in directories consumers may consult for services—such as online Yellow Pages, chamber of commerce guides, and insurance provider listings.
- Include the website address on all printed materials, in press releases, and in conventional advertising like newspaper and radio ads.

ure out how to use.

- Simple navigation. Consumers search for information starting with major topics and then drill down into more detailed facts. Sub-menus should be limited such that important information can be found within one or two clicks of the homepage.
- Poor content. A website’s content should be concise. A text-intensive page will overwhelm users; instead, write using short paragraphs and bullet points. (**Table 1** lists the types of content to include on a website.) Content should also be free of grammar and spelling errors.
- Poor function. A website should load quickly and be free of broken links and empty or “under construction” pages. All forms and search interfaces should work as intended. Avoid using animation or large image files that slow download time or hinder function on handheld devices.

A professionally designed website that considers all of these factors is not inexpensive, as local firms often charge between \$1,000 and \$2,000 or more, depending on the complexity of the project. But a professional web developer should also take care of many of the technical details such as securing a domain name, server hosting, and content maintenance.

**Directing People to Your Website: Search Engines and Internet Directories**

Once an urgent care center establishes its website, it

will want to drive traffic to it. To start with, the website should be included in major search engines like Google, Yahoo, and MSN. This is accomplished in two ways—by submitting the listing directly to the search engine and by being picked up by “spiders” or “crawlers”—software search engines use to scour the Internet for new content.

*Google Maps*

The Internet equivalent of the Yellow Pages, Google Maps, provides consumers with business listings ranked by proximity to the geographical location they specify. To get listed is as simple as filling out an online form. Google will call or send a post card with instructions to verify the physical address.

Once listed, a user can add information to their listing, including a description of services offered, photographs of the center, and even coupons.

Unlike Yellow Pages advertising, this service is free. If a search engine provides patient reviews, ask patients to submit their comments—providing positive “word of mouth” for other Internet users and additional content for search purposes.

Apart from Google Maps, submitting a web listing directly to a search engine does not guarantee a website will appear in searches, much less achieve a high search ranking. Search engines use proprietary formulas to determine listings and retrieval order that consider the page title, overall body content, the number and quality of links on a site, and how long consumers stay on a website.

*Optimization*

Search engine optimization is the process of developing a website such that important keywords and links are likely to be picked up by search engines and retrieved in a higher priority. A professional web developer can build “metatags”—embedded information—into a website to increase the visibility of the website to crawlers. Also linking the website to other listed websites should increase the relevance and ranking in search results. (**Table 3** lists common methods of optimization.)

*Continued on page 32*

In addition to offering free search, Internet search engines sell paid advertising. If a center is not achieving a high ranking through conventional search, the center can purchase “pay per click” advertising that causes banner or sidebar ads to appear on the retrieval page when consumers search for specific terms like “San Antonio” and “urgent care.” The cost of this advertising is dependent on the frequency of search for the selected words and how often consumers click on an advertising link. Because this advertising is on the periphery of the webpage, it is often ignored by savvy Internet users and thus is generally less effective in capturing interest than achieving a high rank in regular searches.

Advertising banners or pop-ups may also be purchased on websites of interest to a center’s community or target demographic, such as local television and newspaper websites. Sometimes this advertising is bundled into the sale of conventional advertising like radio ads or event sponsorships.

The challenge is that such ads function as “mass media”—they’re delivered to all visitors of the host website without regard to need, location, or demographics. Paid banner or pop-up ads are usually most effective when announcing a new center or raising awareness of a promotion like discounted sports physicals or flu shots; when a user “clicks through” to the urgent care center’s website, he or she can learn more about the offering and perhaps print a coupon or flyer.

In addition to driving consumers to a website through search engines, an urgent care center should make sure its web address is listed in all other online directories, including chamber of commerce member lists, insurance company provider listings, and government listings of specialized service providers like civil surgeon immigration physicals or FAA flight physicals.

Last, the urgent care center should include its website address on all printed marketing materials and conventional media advertisements. A website serves as a central resource for all information about an urgent care center and is easily updated when changes occur to operating hours, insurance accepted, or providers on staff.

**Table 3. Elements of Search Engine Optimization**

- **Descriptive title:** The title is what is displayed above the web browser’s toolbar, but it also indicates the subject matter to the search engine. The title should list the center’s name and describe the practice. For example, “First Urgent Care Clinic: Dallas, TX Walk-in Allergies Sprains Strains Flu” is more likely to turn up in searches than just “First Urgent Care.”
- **Keyword-rich description:** The description summarizes the content on each webpage and is often indexed by search engines. The description should include keywords pertaining to the urgent care center’s location, services offered, insurance accepted, and common health conditions treated.
- **Keyword-rich headlines and copy:** The website’s content should be written with the search engine in mind. Arrange copy in bullet points or brief paragraphs that emphasize and repeat important search terms.
- **Real text, no flash:** Search engine crawlers can only detect text on a website. Messages that are embedded in images, saved in PDF files, or appear through Flash animation likely will not be indexed by a search engine. In addition, images on the website should be meta-tagged for detection by photo search engines.
- **Index or site map:** Having one page on the website that summarizes the content and links for all other pages provides a keyword-rich reference for search engines to appropriately classify the website.

### Conclusion

Although the Internet is a global resource, it enables highly targeted and localized promotion of an urgent care center. A well-designed website acts as a centralized information repository about a center’s service offering, and achieving visibility in search engines raises awareness among consumers who are specifically looking for information on urgent care services. An urgent care center’s website is also a point of reference for other forms of Internet promotion, including communities of interest formed by “social media.” ■

*This is the first installment of a two-part series. The next article will describe ways to use “social media” to raise awareness among targeted urgent care user groups and drive additional visits to your website and center.*

### References:

1. Morales L. Nearly Half of Americans Are Frequent Internet Users. Gallup Organization, January 2, 2009.
2. Myers Jack. Print Media Face Staggering Challenges for the Foreseeable Future. *The Huffington Post*. December 8, 2008.
3. Steel E. Extinction Threatens Yellow-Pages Publishers. *The Wall Street Journal*. November 17, 2008.
4. Internet User Forecast by Country. *www.eTForecasts.com*. 2008.