

Summer 1998

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Recommended Citation

Shepherd, C. D., and D. Fell. "Marketing's Role in Hospital Web Site Development." *Marketing Health Services* 18.2 (1998): 42-3.

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Marketing's Role in Hospital Web Site Development

By C. David Shepherd and Daniel Fell

Despite predictions of imminent collapse, the Internet continues its rapid growth. The U.S. Department of Commerce recently announced that more than 100 million people are now online and that Internet usage is doubling every one hundred days. The same report announced that the "digital economy" is growing at double the rate of the overall economy.

In our own research over the last two years, we have seen over 100% growth in the number of hospitals using the Internet as a tool to communicate with their various constituents. As marketers, we must begin to ask ourselves what our role should be in this "digital revolution?"

One of the exciting things about the growth of the Internet has been its grassroots nature. The only requirement for a site on the Internet's World Wide Web has been: (1) an interest in the Internet, (2) a Web hosting Internet provider, and (3) some knowledge of html (hypertext markup language) or one of the simple Web page production software packages on the market. As a result of its novelty and low barriers to entry, sites on the Web have sprung up in many hospital departments long before the hospital

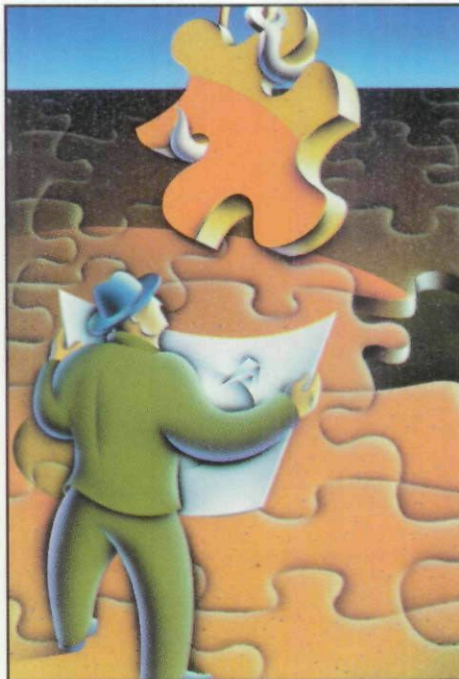


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itself began to consider establishing a Web presence.

When hospitals do decide to commit to the development of a Web site, the responsibility for creation and maintenance of that site is often turned over to the information technology (IT) department. Given that IT staff members oversee computer operations for the hospital, it seems logical for them to oversee the Internet operations as well. In other words, the marketing department often gets left out of the loop.

For example, we recently asked the manager of a major hospital Web site, which reported over 250,000 weekly visits to its site, what role the marketing department played. The answer was no role at all in the site's design, development, or maintenance.

Of course, 250,000 weekly hits does not imply that 250,000 individuals purposely visited this hospital's site. Obviously, some people, including employees, made repeat visits and some individuals visit only by chance.

However, even reducing this number to allow for such occurrences, the hospital has communicated with a significant number of people through this Web site. As marketers we have to view the fact that the marketing department has no role in the development of the Web site with concern.

At its very core, marketing is about communicating. In cases such as this marketers are missing a tremendous opportunity to communicate with the hospital's constituents.

Furthermore, successful marketing is about communicating a consistent image. How consistent an image can we expect when various departments have their own Web sites, each with its own look and feel? How consistent an image can we expect when the marketing department has oversight in the development of other communication tools, such as advertising, but no role in the design, development, or maintenance of the

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In the last two years, there has been a 100% increase in the number of hospitals using the Internet as a tool for communication.

image going out over the Internet?

We suggest that hospital marketers adopt a product marketing concept known as integrated marketing communications (IMC). The IMC approach advocates coordination of all the various promotional elements along with the other activities that communicate with a firm's customers. This coordination reduces duplicated efforts and inconsistencies, and it creates synergy that allows marketers to get the most value for their marketing dollars.

The IMC approach is just as appropriate for hospital marketing as it is for product marketing. As a communication tool with incredible potential, hospital Web site (or sites) should be coordinated with all other hospital promotional and communication tools.

The IMC approach would not require the marketing department take over the maintenance of any Web sites. Instead,

marketing would become intimately involved in establishing an overall strategic plan for the site including determining target audiences, objectives, guidelines for content, and schedules for updates. In other words, the marketing department would handle the Web site just as they would any other communication medium.

However, the IMC approach requires coordination of hospital Web sites with all other communication mediums. To that end, we suggest that marketing has a responsibility to review the content of any existing hospital or departmental Web sites to assure a consistent message and image.

The sites won't necessarily look exactly like the hospital's advertising and other marketing materials, the IMC approach ensures continuity. Creating continuity might be as simple as using the hospital's official logo, but the more consistent the look and feel, the better. Such consistency also enhances the effectiveness of the hospital's communication effort.

For hospitals that are just considering developing a Web site, marketers should step forward and aggressively take a lead role. By stressing the need to coordinate the hospital's Web site with the other aspects of the hospital's strategic marketing plan, marketers can help the hospital maximize its return for its investment.

For those marketers whose hospitals

already have a Web presence, gaining a role in the Web oversight process could be more difficult. However, it's easy to quantify the need for marketing involvement. Most Web sites keep track of number of visits, and each of these contacts can be thought of as a patient deciding on a hospital, a doctor deciding on a home for his or her practice, or a nurse deciding on a place of employment. These numbers can easily be used to justify the need for marketing's involvement.

In short, hospital Web sites have significant potential as interactive communication tools. Next issue we will show how one hospital took a strategic approach to developing its Web presence. ■

We asked the manager of a major hospital Web site what role the marketing department played. The answer was no role at all in design, development, or maintenance.

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