

## 2.00 Meeting the Internet

In this section we look at the way that your practice web site interrelates with other sites serving visitors with similar or complementary interests. We investigate how the search engines are affected by the way that your site connects to others and we look at what to do to your site so that people can find you easily.

### 2.01 Fitting into the web

You mustn't think of your practice web site as standing alone. The power of the internet comes from the way that all the information contained in its billions of pages is interlinked.

Your aim should be to create an online resource which will, figuratively, wave to the precise groups of visitors you hope to attract. There are an enormous number of sites out there, all waving. It isn't easy to make your site visible but you have to do all you can. If you don't you certainly won't attract the right visitors by chance.

The first essential is content. Generous quantities of useful, accurate, high-quality, text-based content. The second essential is content as well, and the third essential – that's right, content. The usefulness of your site is almost entirely defined by the quality of the content you provide – rarely by the whizzyness of the animations and graphics provided by your web designer.

Your aim should be to provide the kind of resource that makes other sites want to point at you, that makes them want to provide links from their site to yours. The quality of incoming links is much more important than their quantity. You need links from the kinds of sites that your clients are likely to visit. You need to provide complementary content so that the owners of such sites want to show their visitors the way to your site.

When a visitor first arrives at your web site, they will most probably have arrived having found a link to your site in one of the major search engines. If not then they will probably arrive through a link from some other web site – that they found in a search engine. Very, very few first time visitors arrive having typed your web address into their browser address bar.

If your site has incoming links from another web site, already in the search engine index, then you will get added quite quickly. You can submit your web address, every search engine has a form to do so somewhere, but the search engines seem to prefer to find you through their own resources and seem to be much slower to include sites without incoming links.

There are thousands of online directories. There is a handful where it is worth checking that your practice is listed accurately. There is one, the human edited Open Directory Project, where being listed can help your web site ranking in search results. There is another, our own Any UK Vet directory, where being listed will bring you clients directly as well as directing visitors to your site,

If you decide to pay to get your web site noticed then there are any number of companies all ready to take your money. You can pay to be submitted to thousands of search engines. You can pay to be included in some search engines. You can pay for links to your site to be presented to potential clients – pay per view. You can pay for each time someone clicks on a link to your site – pay per click. You can pay to be included in a directory. You can pay for an enhanced listing in directory results. If you got serious then you could spend huge sums of money – and potentially not see a single new client at the end of the exercise.

We'll come back to all these topics later in this section but, first, lets take look at the major search engines in more detail

### 2.02 The major search engines

There are ten or so major search engines, considered major because they the best known or most used.

Every web user quickly finds a search engine. Some internet service providers include a search engine in their portal pages. Most web browsers include an integrated link to a search engine. It would be almost impossible to find information online except for search engines.

The basics of using a search engine are very simple. You enter a list of words into a little box and click a button. The search engine returns a list of all the web pages it has found that contain all of those words visible as text.

Returning a list of pages that all contain a particular list of words is simply number crunching – though with the billions of pages the search engines index the list can get a bit long. Google returns three quarters of a million pages containing the phrase “veterinary surgery”. It indexes over eight thousand containing “hypogammaglobulinemia”.

The target for all the search engines is to sort the list of pages they return so that their users find the first few results, the top ten in particular, truly relevant to the reason that they are searching. This is highly complex. Google employs several dozen PhD's to maintain their algorithms. Each page they index is tested against more than a hundred variables. This generates a series of scores. These scores decide where the page appears in the results.

The search engine programmers have a continual battle on their hands. Their task is to keep relevant listings, the sites that searchers are really looking for, in the highest ranked results. If they succeed then they attract more users and more advertising income. If they fail then their users move on, their reputation declines and their income collapses.

The search engine programmers are up against a whole community of web site owners who want to get their site into the top ten results for popular search terms – even though their site has no real relevance for the

people searching. When the programmers get it wrong your search results get littered with irrelevant sites trying to lead you to online casinos or worse.

The search engine companies continually tune their algorithms. The tricks that get sites higher rankings than they deserve are tuned out of the system. There is only one approach that will let you achieve consistent high rankings in the long term.

The search engines want to provide links to quality sites that are relevant to the terms their users enter in the search box – so provide just that.

If you provide a quality site with lots of text based content then the search engines will be on your side and do their best to present you high in the results. If you create a slim site with little content or try to trick the search engines then you will, sooner or later, be shuffled into limbo far down the rankings.

### 2.03 Online directories

There are thousands of online directories. Luckily, most of them don't cover UK veterinary practices so you only have to consider hundreds!

Online directories have a significant disadvantage compared with their print cousins. Before someone can find your practice they first have to find the directory! Unlike printed directories, bright yellow and propping the door open near the phone, online directories don't appear on every users desktop – the search engines do though. Someone looking online for a practice will probably start with the tool they are used to – their favourite search engine. They have to take a conscious step back from what they are actually searching for to look for a directory instead. They don't generally do that.

There are a handful of online directories that people do use. Yell.com, the online version of UK yellow pages and ThomWeb, which is Thompsons online. People know of these largely as a result of advertising in and for their print cousins. There is also Scoot.com. Scoot has no print equivalent but generated wide public awareness through a high profile advertising campaign in the late ninety's. They have declined dramatically since but were bought by BT in 2002 so may rise from the ashes.

The provision of telephone directory services has recently been deregulated. Since BT lost its monopoly a whole raft of directory service companies have sprung up. These are all in the business to make money so their web sites tend to be hedged round with a need to register and log on and the number of available searches is often limited. These are all advertising their services aggressively in order to gain market share so will be attracting users as long as that lasts. Based on the telephone directory, your listing will be automatic. You may be able to pay for an enhanced listing. It is up to you to decide whether this is cost effective.

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has an online directory of practices at [www.findavet.org.uk](http://www.findavet.org.uk). This is the online version of the printed directory that you

probably have in your surgery. You can update your details for free.

All the directories we've mentioned so far keep the information they hold about your surgery hidden. They only provide your details to visitors that fill in the search box. When search engines visit, they don't fill in forms. The directory is added to the search engine index, the information about your surgery isn't.

The Any UK Vet directory is the one exception. The Any UK Vet database is stored as a series of mini web sites, one for each surgery in the UK. The search engines still can't fill in the forms – but this doesn't matter. Every surgery page can be accessed by clickable links through the country and county listings. The search engines follow these easily as no surgery main page is more than three clicks away from any other of the thousands of pages on the site.

A majority of online directories are web directories, only concerned with listing web sites. This means that they are only marginally more useful than a search engine. They may sort sites in some way – by counties commonly – and are likely to provide links to practice sites that don't rank very highly in search engine results. In terms of providing you with useful traffic, their contribution is minimal.

This is one directory where you should get your site listed. The Open Directory Project (ODP) at [www.dmoz.org](http://www.dmoz.org) is a directory of web sites edited by human volunteers – over 62,000 of them. Submission is free and, importantly, their data is provided at no charge to the major search engines and others. When your site is listed in the ODP the search engines know that it has been viewed by a real person and belongs in the category of the directory where its listing appears. Being listed in the ODP often enhances your ranking in search results.

As more and more people get online – and the majority of businesses – so web sites providing links to businesses and services in a relatively small area are becoming more common. You should make a point of searching for examples in your own area, making sure that you are listed and exchanging links.

### 2.04 Search engine optimisation - SEO

When web sites are ranked highly in the search engines - listed in the first few results returned – then they attract larger visitor numbers, sell more and make greater profits. The need to achieve high rankings has led to the creation of a whole new industry - Search Engine Optimisation or SEO.

SEO is new, unregulated, largely based on poorly defined “knowledge” and has a potential to make a large difference to the income that web sites generate – so its not surprising that it attracts large numbers of dubious operators. All claims made by SEO consultancies should be taken with a shovelful of salt. If you are considering employing an SEO company check their portfolio and make a point of talking to previous clients in person.

I don't want to give the impression that SEO firms are all bad. There are lots of competent and conscientious companies that can make a real difference to how well your site performs online. They may not be the ones shouting loudest though.

Search engines want to help every searcher to find what they are looking for as efficiently as possible. They employ expensive teams of highly qualified programmers and mathematicians to maintain the quality of their results. The algorithms they create to decide how pages rank are complex. Like any complex system there is an opportunity for the unscrupulous to manipulate the system. It is possible to achieve undeservedly higher rankings by taking advantage of loopholes in the way that search engines work. This is commonly known as "spamming the search engines".

When a site discovers a new method to "spam" the search engines it is often possible to achieve dramatically improved rankings for a short term. When the cheat comes to the search engines attention it changes its algorithm – and the site drops out of view again. If the abuse is extreme enough the site may even disappear from the index entirely.

The best way to optimise your site is to ensure that it provides the kind of content that searchers are looking for. Each page should have generous quantities of coherent quality content on a single theme. The text should be in natural language and should contain keywords and key phrases that searchers are actually likely to use when searching. To help the search engines your site should avoid page design elements that make it difficult for them to index your content.

The search engines want to return high quality, relevant, content rich sites to their users. If you create just that then you will achieve long term high rankings in all the engines.

## 2.05 Optimising your content

Most optimisation is just common sense, particularly once you realise that the best approach is to provide your users what they want.

Before worrying about any of the optimisation approaches on this page be sure that the content on your site provides your clients with the information they are after in a clear and understandable way. Don't compromise this by worrying about word counts or keyword densities.

The aim of optimisation is to make it easier for your clients, potential or existing, to find your web site in the major search engines. Over three quarters of visitors making a first visit to your web sites will come through a search engine so optimisation for them is logical. Less obviously, a large proportion of repeat visits will probably arrive the same way. The search engines have become so well integrated into the way people move around the internet that they are much more likely to type your web address into a search engine than into the address bar of their browser.

Optimisation is done page by page. For each page you need to decide on a range of specific search terms that your visitors are likely to use when looking for your web site.

This is, initially, largely intuitive. Put yourself in the place of your clients and consider what search terms you would use if you were in need of the information on this particular page. Once you have some options there are some useful web sites – [www.wordtracker.com](http://www.wordtracker.com) for instance - where you can compare the wordlist you have created with terms that people are actually searching for online. These are less useful for a practice web site, serving a relatively small geographical area, than they are for web sites with a more universal target audience.

There is no point in optimising your site for single keywords like vet or veterinary. There is too much competition worldwide from other sites using the same words. You can optimise single words in your practice name and address if they are out of the ordinary, otherwise most of your optimisation will be based on keyphrases. These are simply pairs or groups of words that people expect to see together on your pages. You can optimise each page for sets of keywords - "puppy party", "puppy training", "young dog" etc

Each page should, in general, be about a single topic or group of closely related themes. Apart from usability issues this makes it much easier to optimise the page for a particular set of keywords and key phrases

Your home page is the most important page to get right. It shouldn't be a splash page – that's a page with some eye candy but no content. It should be a focal point for all the content on your site and contain navigation links to take visitors where they want to go as efficiently as possible.

Be sure to include your main key phrases for each page in the title of that page – that's the text that appears right at the top of your browser window when you view the page – and in headings – text presented in bold or in a larger size towards the top of the page. The search engines consider title and heading text important.

Use your keyphrases more than once – but not to excess – about six times seems a generally accepted limit. Don't compromise the readability of the page for the sake of getting them in one more time.

Make sure that you cover each topic in appropriate breadth. Brevity is, admittedly, a virtue online but you can go too far. A loose guideline is to provide at least two hundred words or so. That's enough for you to include a functional spread of keywords and phrases.

Meta tags are hidden blocks of text – only visible to the search engines. They were abused by people spamming the search engines early in the web's short history and are now mostly ignored. It is still worth including them, particularly directory tags, but they must be tailored for each page specifically and should only include words that appear in visible text that page.

## 2.06 Link optimisation

The power of the internet lies in the way that web sites and web pages link together. If your site is useful then other web sites will want to provide a link to it. The search engines, Google in particular, look at how many of the sites in their index provide links to your web site. If a lot of other sites find you important enough to provide you with a link then your ranking improves.

Google has an element in its algorithm known as page rank. Every page it indexes is allocated a score depending on how many incoming links point at it and how many outbound links it contains. Every page rank is then recalculated to create new scores decided by the number of incoming links and the relative page ranks of each page. This alters everyone's ranking – so they reiterate the process another time or two until scores settle down.

The basic count of links pointing at your site is known as “Link Popularity”. Once your site is optimised, easy for the search engines to index and packed with relevant content, then the most powerful way to improve the ranking of your site is by working on your link popularity. If you approach the task with the best interests of your clients in mind then it will also bring you the right sort of visitors.

While this can be a time-consuming process it generally takes you some interesting places online and helps you understand how your site fits into place in the community of sites around yours. Your first task is to find sites with related content that are willing to trade links.

Start by entering selected key words and phrases from your site into a search engine. Including elements of your address and the addresses of your clients is likely to take you to sites serving your local community. These are probably going to be destinations for your clients and quite likely to be happy to exchange links.

Searching using the common species or breeds you treat will find animal sites worldwide that are less likely to be suitable for a link exchange. Searching on less common breeds are a better bet. If you have particular interests or experience in, say, potbellied pigs then a potbellied web site will probably exchange links to help aficionados of the breed in your area. If you also provide quality information about the breed that compliments their content, then a link exchange is even more likely.

Once you have a collection of links you should decide whether providing a link to each site will serve the interests of your visitors and whether you would want a link to your practice to appear on their pages. Don't dilute the quality of your site just for the sake of a few links. You then need to contact the owners of each site and request an exchange of links. Do this with a personal e-mail, praising their site and pointing out the mutual advantages to their visitors of a link exchange.

Our approach is that we will only request links from sites that we are happy to link to even if they don't provide a link in return. We put a link online before contacting the other site. We then send them an e-mail

that informs them of the link we have provided, offers them an opportunity to edit the text accompanying their link, requests a link in return and includes the suggested text and graphics they might like to use.

There is no need to do this all at once. Spending a few minutes looking for sites each time that you go online is likely to be more efficient in the long term.

## 2.07 Paying for it

You can't, at the moment, directly improve your search engine ranking by waving your credit card around. Any search engine trying this would soon find their reputation plummeting. There are, however, several ways you could spread your marketing budget around online.

None of the options we list here are ideal for marketing UK veterinary practices. The various approaches are designed for web sites with a global, or at least national, client base. The area served by most practices is much smaller. Most options are the equivalent of a small animal practice advertising its services on national television.

**PFI - Pay for inclusion** - Some search engines will fast track a review of your site in order to get it indexed more quickly. This doesn't generally guarantee inclusion, just that someone will look at your site within a day or two. The sites that offer this service know that, if they only show sites that have paid for inclusion, they will lose credibility so they also provide free listings. It just takes more time. It is unlikely that paying for inclusion will prove cost effective for a practice web site.

**PFP – Pay for placement** - Several search engines accept payment to place an additional “sponsored link” above the normal search results. You select which search phrases you want to target and, when someone searches using those words your link is prominently displayed – and your account is charged a few pence. If someone clicks on your link a further charge may be added. Paying for placement is valid for highly competitive search terms where a large number of web sites are trying to capture traffic. In the main, the kind of keywords that someone would use when looking, specifically, for your practice should be easily optimised within your web site so that you appear in the top few links anyway.

**Agency banners** - Banners are the rectangular ads you see all over the internet. They are unpopular with users because too many examples use garish colours and distracting flashing effects in order to encourage people to click on them. Software is available to prevent at least some being displayed. Banner advertising is generally arranged through an agent and can leave you with little control over where your banner is displayed or what other content the link to your site is alongside. There is usually a set up fee then a PPV and/or PPC charging model. Banners, in their usual manifestation, are unsuitable to promote a practice site.

Individual banners - You may be able to place individual banners on suitable sites through direct negotiation with its owners.

PPC – Pay per click -Each time someone clicks on a paid link or banner you get charged – anything from pence to pounds.

PPV – Pay per view - Each time your paid link or banner is presented to a viewer you get charged – though generally a bit less than for a PPC

PopUps - With similar set up and running costs as banners, these open the link to your site in a new browser window. They annoy lots of web users and there are lots of software packages available to hide them or prevent them being displayed.

AdWords - This is Google's advertising program. You “bid” for specific keyword combinations. When a web page containing those words is viewed, if the web master of the site has set the page up to present AdWords, then a link to your site appears on that page. If someone clicks on your link then you get charged a fee.

None of these options are likely to provide your site with much useful traffic – but could give your credit card a good toasting. AdWords may be viable if you have sites serving your local area that carry AdWords and you carefully select your keywords to appear on that site.