

4.00 Local

It may be called the world wide web but, as more people and businesses in the UK have got online we are reaching the point where the internet can be looked on as a local resource as much as a global one. This development ties in with the very local business model of UK surgeries. The development of locally focused internet content is a powerful reason to consider getting your practice online

4.01 Your local community online

As the use of the internet has become more universal then the size of the geographical area viable as an online community has shrunk. In the early years the community was worldwide – though mostly American. As more users came online and more businesses got web sites the internet began to divide into national communities. We are approaching the point where, with half the UK population and three quarters of UK businesses online, communities become viable at county and town levels.

The major search engines are starting to recognise this development and investigating local search as a service. Mirroring the development of the Internet this is so far mainly for US locations but it is already starting to happen in the UK. Smaller local search engine projects are starting up in the hope of capturing some of the major search engines market share.

Once there is a search engine offering results for your area then it is clearly to your advantage to be listed. If you have optimised your site for the major search engines then you will probably be listed without any further action. You should be sure to include as many local keywords as possible. Placenames, local attractions, anything that defines the area you serve.

Some time spent researching possible keywords for your local area could bring other benefits as well. Search for the names of the places that your clients come from in the major search engines. This will harvest a list of local web sites. Look through your local press and local directories. This will gather more. Put a notice up in your waiting room asking if any of your clients have web sites or want to recommend a local site.

You will probably find quite a few sites for local businesses, attractions, government, charities and people. If you provide a link from your site to all of these that you feel could be useful to your clients – not just as animal owners but as local residents – then you can also look to them to provide links to your site.

Some of the sites you find will probably be poorly optimised and not as easy to find as your site. If you include a generous block of descriptive text with the link you provide to other local sites then your page may well rank more highly than theirs. A local resident looking for, say, the local council offices, may well find the helpful link you provide on your site before they find the one the

council provides. They may not need your services at the moment – but next week...

The advice about soliciting links in section 2.06 still applies. Put links to the sites which you feel are useful for your visitors. With a link already online, send a personal e-mail to the webmaster of each site requesting a return link. Coming from local sites that are, presumably, working on attracting local visitors, incoming links to your site are highly likely to provide you with paying clients.

4.02 Offline

It is easy to get involved in developing online services but don't forget that a percentage of your clients are not online. As you create material for your web site you should look for ways to present the equivalent information in other ways.

Web pages, viewed on a computer monitor, have different design criteria to pages designed to be read as a leaflet or poster. Simply clicking the "Print" button in your web browser rarely produces a satisfactory presentation of a web page.

Let's assume that you have a web page which you want to share with visitors to your surgery – or a newsletter which you want to put online – what do you need to look out for?

The online version needs its text broken into manageable chunks – blocks of a few lines each. This isn't because web users have a shorter attention span – its to help them keep their place as they scroll your page upwards in their browser window. If you are creating a print version of a web page you will probably be able compress several web pages into one printed page.

Some fonts work better on screen while others are more effective in print. As a generalisation, sans-serif fonts like Arial or Helvetica are easier to read from a screen while serif fonts like Times New Roman or Bookman are more effective on a printed page.

Ideally, images should be created at different resolutions depending whether they are going to be displayed online or are destined to be printed. Web pages need images optimised to load rapidly and are displayed on-screen at around 72 image elements per inch. For print it doesn't generally matter if images are large but their resolution should match the capability of the printer you use. This will be hundreds of image elements per inch.

4.03 Promoting your site offline

You can't just put a web site online and then expect it to be found by all your existing clients. You need to tell them that it is there, tell them how to find it and tell them what wonders they will find.

Use your web address wherever you can. On stationery, vaccination reminders, admission paperwork, in advertising, on the waiting room noticeboard. If you are going to put the necessary work into maintaining your

web site then do your best to maximise the number of clients who visit.

Make your site address more memorable by associating it with a tagline about your site - "Read the latest practice news at www.uursite.co.uk" - but if you promise the latest news, make sure that it gets online.

You can promote your web site and share its content with clients that don't have internet access at the same time. As you add new material to your site then put a large format printed version on your notice board – clearly labeled as coming from your web site. Have a folder in the waiting room kept up to date with copies of all the interesting pages from your web site.

Have forms available in your waiting room for people to sign up for your electronic newsletter or for an e-mail notifying them when you put new material online on your web site.

If you are happy to put a notice up in your waiting room promoting some local event – then add a label that the details are also available on the practice web site and put the information online as well.

Anything that goes on your waiting room noticeboard can be repeated on your web site – from kittens needing homes to cat sitting services.