

UK Veterinary Practices and the Growth of the Internet



Confident online, Spot had no problem cancelling his castration appointment.

A series of articles specifically focussed on the needs of UK veterinary practices in the light of developing internet usage among your clients. We discuss the design and implementation of practice web sites and look at the ways that e-mail and other technologies can be integrated into your surgery routine.

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0.00 Overview

These articles discuss the impact of the internet and its associated technologies on UK veterinary practices.

For any existing bricks and mortar business the design of a web site and the implementation of new communication channels must tie in with the way the business already interacts with the real world.

UK veterinary practices are built around a unique business model. No other businesses have the same combination of a professional service provided to such a local client base. When you develop your practice web site then unique criteria must apply.

In this document we look at the broad range of factors affecting the design and implementation of a practice web site and consider ways that new communication technologies, particularly e-mail, can be used in your practice.

Reading these articles won't turn you into an internet specialist. It will, we hope, provide you with a broad overview of the possibilities. When you come to discuss requirements with your chosen web design company then you will have a better idea of the questions to ask – and an improved chance of understanding the answers.

0.01 Declaration of interest

We must start by declaring our interest in the commercial aspects of the subject material covered in these articles. Vetlist Ltd provides a range of online packages specifically designed for UK veterinary practices – and that's all the sales pitch this document contains. In this suite of articles our aim is to provide you with useful information without specific bias towards our own products.

We do discuss the Any UK Vet web site, a service which we provide. We feel that this is valid as the site fills a specific need online not covered by any other provision.

These articles are a synopsis of our research into the relationship between UK veterinary practices and the developing new technologies. We hope that you will find our analysis a useful starting point as you look into the specific requirements of your own situation and that it will help you select the best solutions for getting your practice online.

0.02 Does your practice need to be online ?

For the moment you don't actually need to be online.

The care and treatment of animals at the core of veterinary practice doesn't translate into an internet based business in the same way as, say, the sale of books. If it did you would already be in competition with the veterinary equivalent of Amazon.com. People would be posting their Kitty to vet central, probably in Milton Keynes. Kitty would be couriered back the next day, fully serviced and minus all the reproductive bits.

Being online is peripheral to your core veterinary provision. Having a web site is part of your marketing strategy. Using e-mail provides an alternative to your phone and fax.

Why do you advertise in Yellow Pages?

Because that is where people look for you.

Why do you have a telephone?

Because that is how clients expect to contact you.

The situation is changing. More than half of your clients have internet access from home, or work, or both. They are using e-mail, in many cases more often than they use the phone. They are looking for you online. They would probably like to e-mail you rather than phone.

To remain competitive then, quite soon, your practice details will need to be easily found when clients look for your practice online. To stay in touch you will shortly need to integrate e-mail and other new means of communication into your daily routine as intimately as you currently embrace the telephone.

So. For the moment you don't need to be online. Soon though, if your clients can't find you and can't talk to you online, you will start to lose out to other practices that have adopted the new technologies more effectively.

1.00 Fitting into the internet

Far too many practice web sites have been created with little thought being given to how they are supposed to serve either the needs of the practice or the needs of the visitors they hope to attract.

In this section we will look at the potential benefits of having a practice web site and consider how your practice web site fits into the billions of pages on the Internet. We will investigate how potential clients find your details and consider the ways that your practice might benefit from their visits. We will look at the kind of content you need to put online to realise those benefits.

1.01 Just a simple web site . .

Once upon a time we volunteered to design a bit of a web site for our local veterinary practice. This has one and a half surgeries and three and a half vets. How much work could that be we thought!

We started by analysing existing vet web sites. We wanted to see how they worked, how they were put together and the way they looked. To be honest, we were looking for an example of excellence among them so that we could clone it and save ourselves hours of work!

We went looking for Veterinary Web sites. This was 1999. There weren't very many and some were surprisingly difficult to find. There aren't that many more in 2004. We persevered until we had built up a reasonable collection. The first thing we wanted to assess was the probable return on investment that each site was bringing to its practice.

Some sites had clearly had a lot of expensive professional time spent on their creation. Others looked like the hobby of an interested vet. One or two looked like they'd been put together by chance as the practice cat walked across the keyboard. Investment ranged from tuppence to thousands of pounds.

What were these practices expecting from their web site? Did they want to improve animal care in their area? Sell more products? Attract new clients? Encourage existing clients to take extra services? In most cases it was very difficult to see any potential returns for the practice.

Estimating positive returns was easy. Almost universally zero. When sites had been online for a while there was a general feel of those piles of expensively produced practice brochures that gather dust in an office cupboard. Out of date information, pictures of staff long gone. Many sites proudly displayed a label "Site last updated" with a date two years or more before. The content was generally thin. You could read every page and come away with nothing more than the phone number and the post code (though some sites even failed to show one or other of these).

The clearest returns were negative. Some sites were so badly implemented that the lack of professionalism in their design could only suggest a similar lack of professionalism to be possible in the surgery. Today, with many

more visitors having experience online, the effect of a poorly designed site has become more pronounced. People "know" what a professionally designed site look like and they are much less forgiving of an amateurishly produced site attempting to promote a professional service.

We found a handful of exceptions. Practices where someone, generally a principal, had discovered both an interest and an aptitude for promoting their surgery online. The most effective of these combined an enthusiasm for the internet with a clear parallel enthusiasm for the practice of veterinary arts.

We clearly weren't going to find an easy solution to designing this one little practice web site. We would have to do some work - rolling up our sleeves we started by considering who the site was going to serve.

1.02 Who is a practice web site for ?

Lets start by considering the visitors who are likely to come to a practice web site. Sort them into groups, try to define their needs and consider how best to serve them.

We could go on for page after page breaking possible visitors into smaller and smaller sub groupings - A Ford-full of drug company reps in this column. All the relations of the youngest trainee over there. We filled several notebooks with the exercise before concluding that there are three broad groups.

The rest

A large group as most of the online population of the world comes into this category. They may be perfectly presentable - or they may not - but they certainly aren't particularly profitable. The best way to impress them is to do a good job of serving the needs of the other two groups. "The Rest" may be safely ignored.

Potential clients

We are using "clients" here in a very broad sense. We include everyone who is likely to have a commercial or professional relationship with your surgery. This will include veterinary colleagues and companies looking to supply you with goods and services as well as the puppy owner looking for a vaccination.

Your potential clients will probably be looking for your practice on the basis of the geographical area you serve or possibly a specific service you might offer. They need to find your practice details when they look for a veterinary service and a placename - they won't know your name until they find you.

Existing clients

Again, we use “clients” in the broadest sense. Like your potential clients, existing clients will need your site to be easy to find online. They will still, from time to time, need to look up some of your basic details. Your fax number or your Saturday opening times. Even if they know you have a web site they are likely to look for you by entering your practice name in a search engine rather than by typing your web address into their browser.

You need to decide what you are going to provide for your existing clients once they have found your web site. How do you expect your practice to benefit. If you can attract them to visit your site regularly you gain an opportunity to promote improved animal care in your area and to let them know about new products and services.

We'll return to the needs of your existing clients in a few pages time. First, let's take a closer look at the needs of your potential clients.

1.03 Potential clients

Let's consider the design of your practice web site from the point of view of your potential clients. Who is visiting and how do they find your site.

Are they looking online? Yes! According to late 2003 figures from the Bureau of National Statistics 48 per cent of households in the UK can access the Internet from home. Two thirds of UK businesses are online. Sixty percent of the UK population has used the internet. At least half of potential clients are likely to be looking for details of your practice online.

All Internet users quickly become familiar with one or other of the main search engines, Yahoo, Google, MSN, AOL. Various flavours of search engine are built into the portal pages provided by the big Internet Service Providers and into web browsing software like Internet Explorer. "To Google" is in the process of entering various languages as a verb.

The majority of visitors arriving at your web site will either have found it as a result of a search or as a link from another web site - probably also found with a search engine. Very few people type in web addresses. Those that do type in web addresses tend to type them into a search engine. The web address for Hotmail, www.hotmail.com, is a very commonly used search term and provides a graphic example of the way that peoples first choice is to go to their preferred search engine.

For your practice to be easily found by new clients it is important that your practice web site is easy to find in the major search engines. Potential clients won't be looking for your practice by name. They will be looking for the services you offer and for the areas you serve. Ensuring that they find your site requires an understanding of how the search engines work.

So, let's take a look at searching

1.04 Introduction to search engines

The major search engines, there are about ten that are important, all work on words. To search, you send a string of words to your chosen search engine. The search engine simply returns a list of web pages, each of which contains all the words in your query.

How do the search engines know which pages to return? They maintain huge indexes of all the words from billions of web pages. As I write the Google index holds over four billion web pages. Each search engine continually sends out robot indexing programs to visit and check for changes on all the pages they know about – and to follow links to new sites and additional pages.

The search engines may take note that a page has images or whizzy graphics, pretty coloured text or an interesting background - but only as something hanging around with what they are really interested in – words.

The search engines don't see the visible information contained in an image – they just collect the text visible around it. They will take an interest in the sizes and colours you use for the information on your pages – but only to be sure that visitors can see the same words they do. At one time it was possible to hide text and so cheat the search engines by defining white text on a white background or black on black.

Most of the search engines have a form where you can submit the address of your web site. They prefer, however, to think that they have found your site themselves. The best way to get yourself added to their indexes is to have an incoming link from another site that is already listed.

To ensure that your pages appear in the list of results when someone searches for “vet in yourtown” then the words “vet” and “yourtown” have to appear together – as words not pictures – on at least one of your pages. If they appear in an important part of your page – like the title. If they appear more than once on a page. If they appear together on more than one page on your site – then your pages are more likely to appear high up in the list of web pages returned when someone searches for “vet in yourtown”.

This the essential essence of the way search engines work. Let's apply this to the content you put online for your potential clients.

1.05 Content for potential clients

Your potential clients are looking for your practice using details of the areas you serve and the services you provide. How can you design your pages so that they find you easily?

To help potential clients you need to state obvious facts about your practice and about each surgery. The species you treat, your contact address, your phone number, a location map, and your opening hours. It's amazing how many practice web sites put this sort of information in out of the way places. Even more amazing

is that some practices fail to include some of this information entirely!

It is sensible to display your practice name and your contact details on every page. This helps to make your site easier for existing clients to find. Make sure that the search engines can read it though – if your practice name and address appear in as a graphic make sure that they are repeated in plain text as well.

Potential clients from your surrounding areas are going to be looking for a practice where they are, not where you are. You need to include the names of the places your clients come from. These don't all want to be in one place as a list. They are more effective if you can use placenames in the middle of natural language. Search engines are suspicious of lists.

You can't just assume that potential clients will all search for your practice using the same simple term. "Vet in yourtown" for instance. As you write the copy for your site you should try and introduce as many variations as possible without making your text read like a cross between a gazetteer and a thesaurus. Don't try and get all the variations on every page. Use as many alternatives as possible but don't compromise the readability of your site

Don't be reticent about presenting details of the services you offer. Every additional word you write makes it easier for a potential client to find you. Take a leaf from the journalists handbooks. Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them what you have to tell them. Then tell them what you have just told them. The natural desire is to do this without too many repeated words so you get a nice spread of keywords and phrases and your page will therefore be much easier to find.

So. Your web site is well populated with all the search terms that your potential clients are likely to use. Lots of people looking for a vet in your area find your web site. Will this mean that every visitor becomes a long term satisfied client? No. Your visitors need a bit more information – and it is not something that you can provide satisfactorily within your web site. - They need to be satisfied that they are making a fully informed choice.

1.06 Informed choice

We are going to start by looking at the ways new clients find you without the internet.

How do new clients find your practice at the moment? Recommendations from existing clients. Spotting your surgery as they drive to the shops. Printed directories like Yellow Pages. Advertisements you place in local papers. Of these, a display ad in Yellow Pages probably represents a major portion of your marketing budget.

What makes printed directories like Yellow Pages so effective? There are four main factors.

Printed Directories

- 1 **Universal YES**
Free copy around practically every telephone
- 2 **Organised YES**
Practices are grouped into geographical areas
- 3 **Complete YES**
All the practices within the area covered
- 4 **Accurate YES**
Misprints happen - but it's rare

When someone looks for a practice offline they commonly pick up Yellow Pages. In YP they know that they are looking at a complete and accurate list and that the surgery they select is very likely to be the one that suits them best. They feel that YP lets them make an informed choice.

Now lets look at the same factors when someone uses a search engine to look for a practice.

Search engine

- 1 **Universal YES**
The search engine is universal online
- 2 **Organised NO**
Certainly not organised
- 3 **Complete NO**
Only practices with a web site appear in results
- 4 **Accurate NO**
Information is often inaccurate or out of date

When someone looks for a practice online they generally start with their preferred search engine. They don't get results that give them the same confidence as using YP though. The search engines don't organise their results into convenient geographical areas. Because the search engines only index web sites the list is far from complete. Practice web sites that aren't designed to be easily found are so far down the results that they may as well not exist. Practice web sites that haven't been updated since the initial flush of enthusiasm that saw them created may display out of date information.

Clearly, people can't have the same confidence in search engine results as in the vet listings in YP. They may find your web site, they may be impressed by the services you offer, but they can't be certain that you are their best choice because they don't have information about the other surgeries in their area.

How can you build up search engine users confidence to the point where they feel able to make an informed choice? Ideally, every surgery in your area needs an up to date web site as easily found as yours. If the results provided by the search engines were as organised, complete and accurate as those from the print directories then potential clients would have the confidence to act on the information they provide.

We started this series of articles by looking at the design considerations for a simple practice web site. Once work on its design reached this point it became clear that, before our one web site could be fully effective at attracting new clients, every practice in its area would ideally need a quality, easily found, web site so that visitors could make an informed choice.

This, initially, sounds counterintuitive. Why wish that all your competitors have a web site? The reason largely comes from the unique way that vets, companion animal practices in particular, are seen by their clients. The prime consideration for the majority of clients is distance. They may be influenced by the ease of parking or the provision of specific services but initially they want to know which practice is nearest. Something of the order of 85% of urban small animal clients live within two miles of their chosen surgery.

If you are the only practice in your area with a web site then the majority of potential new clients visiting your site will not be able to decide whether your surgery is their best choice. They may be impressed by the services you offer but will remain hopeful that a nearer surgery will match your provision. They will look elsewhere for the information they need, probably reverting to Yellow Pages, and your investment in your web site will bring you no benefit.

If, on the other hand, they can find listings for all the surgeries in their area then they will feel able to make an informed selection. They will be able to decide which surgeries are nearest. They will be able to compare services. Your web site can then have an effect similar to a larger ad in Yellow Pages. You can extol your virtues, promote the superiority of your services and show a picture of your car park so they know that your parking is easy.

We decided to take a look at what might happen to our simple web site project as other practices in the area gained web sites.

1.07 Complete and Accurate

As the number of practices with a web site increases then potential clients looking online are theoretically going to get access to a progressively more complete and accurate set of surgery data through the major search engines - or are they?

Web design is a far from exact science. Some sites are much more likely to appear in particular search results than others. If each practice organises its own web site individually then there is nothing to say when the list is complete and no-one to take responsibility for its accuracy.

Still trying to do our best for our one small practice we returned to the drawing board. We considered what would happen if some outside agency created basic web sites for all the nearest surgeries to our base surgery - the one we are supposed to be creating a web site for.

Creating web sites for the nearest surgeries to our one clinic meant that the practices at the edge of the area covered wouldn't have a full set of other vets for users to compare. If the area covered was large enough then visitors may be in a position to make an informed selection between the surgeries at the centre of the area but the whole concept would lose credibility once people realise that they couldn't make valid choices for practices around the edges.

There was only one solution. Add web sites for every surgery in every direction until we reach the sea. Every UK veterinary surgery needs a basic web site.

We ended up creating a free basic web site for every UK veterinary surgery and the Any UK Vet web site was born. Our motivation wasn't purely altruistic of course. We had moved forward from the needs of our single web site. We are a web design company and we want an active marketplace in veterinary web sites where practices can see real benefits from investing in a web site. It was clear that potential clients would only use the internet to look for practices when they could have the same confidence in the results returned from search engines as they have in the listings in various print directories. Your practice web site would then be able to show a worthwhile return on investment in the form of paw prints in your waiting room.

We are going to take a look at how the Any UK Vet web site works. This isn't for the sake of promoting of one of our services. If the Any UK Vet site had been created by someone else then we would be explaining how it worked in equal detail. The Any UK Vet web site turns the major search engines into an online equivalent of print directories. It has an important part to play in making every practice web site easier to find online.

Any UK Vet and the major search engines

Let's look once again at the four factors from section 1.06 once the major search engines have access to comparable web sites for every UK veterinary surgery through the Any UK Vet site.

Search engines with Any UK Vet

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1 Universal | YES |
| The search engine is universal online | |
| 2 Organised | YES |
| Organisation is provided by Any UK Vet | |
| 3 Complete | YES |
| Any UK Vet entries for every UK surgery | |
| 4 Accurate | YES |
| Any UK vet is continuously maintained | |

The combination of the major search engines and the Any UK Vet web site provides potential clients with the universal, organised, complete and accurate list of surgeries they need to make an informed choice, matching the services provided by Yellow Pages and the other print directories offline. Half the population of the UK are potentially looking for information online so your free

Any UK vet listing is as important as your YP ad to your practices marketing program.

So lets see what your free web site on Any UK Vet looks like.

1.08 Your free Any UK Vet site

The internet has grown on a reputation for generosity in the provision of information. Your free web site on Any UK Vet is no exception. You can add more information for free than you could get into a full page Yellow Pages ad costing thousands.

The Any UK Vet site contains individual listings for every surgery, right down to the smallest branch. One entry is for a clinic held in a village hall for just an hour a week. The first thing people want to know is their nearest surgery - if they didn't there would be far fewer practices maintaining branch surgeries in every outpost of pet owning population - listing surgeries individually makes this easier.

Every surgery listing has its own control panel. Through this you can edit your basic contact information and also add a wide range of other information about your surgery. You can add details of your surgery hours, the species you treat, the standards you have achieved and the services you provide.

If you have more than one surgery you can create links between them. You can add an e-mail link for clients to contact you if they choose. You can add a link to your practice web site if you have one.

You can add a welcoming message for visitors. This is a block of text, the search engines favourite, and it has the effect of making your listing more likely to appear in search engine results. Your hours appear on their own page - so do referral services if you offer them. There is plenty of available space for yet more text.

Your free site can end up with several pages. Each of these is indexed by the major search engines. Pages on the site are designed to rank well, particularly for searches like "vet in placename". Because it is a large site with thousands of unique pages on a consistent theme, entries from the Any UK Vet site generally appear high in search engine results.

If a potential client of your practice looks online for a vet they will quickly find an Any UK Vet practice listing, possibly yours, possibly a surgery near you. Every page of every practice listing has a search box. Users can enter their postcode or a placename and get a list of their nearest vets.

It may seem counterproductive to have a search box to take visitors away from your free site once they have found you - but just think of all those other surgeries in your area with search boxes that are bringing clients to your listing.

Once users have found the list of their nearest surgeries they can limit the results to just show the surgeries that treat the specific species they own or offer the partic-

ular service they need. Surgeries that haven't added the information for their surgeries don't appear in these results.

It is time to consider the needs of your existing clients.

1.09 Why attract existing clients?

The first question to ask is not how to attract your existing clients - but why. Why do you want them to visit, what benefits do you expect for your practice and what do you expect your clients to take away from a visit to your site?

First, look at what you already provide for your existing clients which will translate into content on your web site. If you already produce a practice newsletter or regularly send information to clients then your web site will enable you to enhance their effectiveness - and possibly reduce your production costs. If you don't provide these, or similar services like regular newspaper articles, then you should consider carefully whether or not you need to develop your web site to attract existing clients. It isn't essential to do so.

You need to define the benefits you expect to come from clients visiting your web site. These may be purely commercial - increasing sales of products and uptake of services. At the other end of the spectrum altruistic - promoting responsible animal ownership within the community you serve. In practice you will probably find a balance.

What do your clients take away from a visit? Information in some form. The challenge is to define which information. The Internet is an enormous information resource, your practice web site a mere drop in its ocean. What information can you provide your clients which will uniquely answer their needs.

Attracting your clients to visit your web site once isn't going to keep them up to date with the latest products, introduce them to your new services or find a home for that unwanted mongrel. You need them to visit regularly, the more often the better. The information you provide must both answer their needs and attract them to visit your site again - and again - and again.

It isn't too difficult to convince people to visit your web site once. If you include your web address everywhere you can - on letterheads, invoices, business cards, advertisements and posters in the waiting room - and add a call to "Visit our web site today" - then your clients are quite likely to visit out of curiosity - once.

Put yourself in a position similar to one of your clients. Let's suppose that you spot a web address that interests you. You visit the site. You find interesting articles and a promise to remain current, to add new content, to stay up to date. You bookmark the site.

Later, you return to the site, if you find that the content has been updated as promised then you are likely to visit again. You may become a regular visitor. You are more likely to purchase items from their catalogue.

On the other hand, if the content is unchanged, the promises unfulfilled, then the likelihood of your third visit diminishes. A third visit to an unchanged site will, almost certainly, be your last.

How often do you need to update the information on your site? It's a balancing act. You want to spend the minimum amount of time creating new material. Your clients want to see new articles relevant to their interests every time they visit. You want them to remember your site and visit it regularly. They will stop visiting if you update your site too slowly.

Another little exercise. If you find and bookmark a web site that covers a subject that you are interested in and which promises regularly updated content - how long would you wait before visiting for a second time and how many visits would you make before assuming that the promise was false and that the site wasn't going to be updated.

Assuming that the site was updated regularly, how often would this have to happen for you to continue to remember to visit?

If you decide that there are good reasons to attract regular repeat visits from your existing clients then you need to make a full commitment. A regular flow of new information is essential to keep them coming back. There is no point in doing it halfheartedly. Better to create a very good site designed to only serve the needs of your potential clients than to promise a site with regular updates to interest your existing client base and then fail to deliver on your promise.

Lets consider what kind of content you need to create.

1.10 Content to attract existing clients

Alright! You have decided that you want to attract your existing clients to visit your web site regularly. You, and your staff, are committed to creating regular new content for your site. What kind of content do you need? What will attract your existing clients and keep them coming back?

The content you provide has to be specifically targeted at your clients. They need to get something from your web site that they can't get elsewhere. Among the billions of pages on the Internet, why should your site be the one they come back to again and again?

What is special about your clients? What do they have in common that you can use to define unique content? There are two things. They certainly have animals and they most probably live relatively close to your surgery. Local animal owners.

There is only one class of material that can attract regular repeat visits from your existing clients. The magic word is local. Local content about local animals, their local owners and their local veterinary surgery. It's local content that keeps small newspapers alive up and down the country.

...and what happens to last weeks local paper? The cat pees on it. Last weeks news is replaced by this weeks. This weeks news is often much the same as last weeks, only the names change. The same basic articles, rewritten with a changing cast of local characters, have kept local newspapers alive and reasonably profitable for a hundred years or more. The same approach can work for your web site.

A robust policy of removing content would do most web sites a world of good. What good is fireworks advice in February? How can you make the advice fresh come October when it's been on the web site all year? Put it online at the appropriate time, take it down as it goes out of season.

There is no substitute for regularly refreshed local content. You and your staff are the only people in a position to create it. Nothing created in some distant web designers studio, however whizzy or technically advanced, can match a fuzzy snapshot of your head veterinary nurse visiting the gerbils at the local primary school.

Once you let them know that their school is going to be on your web site then this kind of article will attract visits from all the children, their parents, their friends, their aunty and granny and the lady who lives next door - the list goes on and on and nearly everyone will live in your surgery catchment area.

You will still have clients without internet access. You don't want them to feel left out. The content you create for your web site should also be made available for clients visiting your waiting room. Print a newsletter, put copies of articles on your noticeboard, create a paper version of your site in a folder. You might even consider making your web site available in the waiting room - an old computer is inexpensive and your web site can be displayed without requiring an internet connection.

Lets put a couple of long standing myths about content to rest

1.11 Content that doesn't work

Try asking a few people, both vets and clients, what content your web site should provide. Two things are very commonly suggested. Veterinary advice and an online pet shop. Lets see how effective, or not, they are.

Lots of practice web sites promise veterinary advice. None provide a comprehensive resource and none provide advice at the level clients might expect. This isn't the practices fault, it is an inevitable consequence of a combination of factors.

Lets consider the level of advice that your clients are hoping for. They would like to find free professional advice, comparable to that they would receive in the surgery and preferably at a level which will save them taking their credit cards for a walk. Many of your clients will see the verbal advice you provide during a consultation as mere conversation - not part of your stock in trade

– and won't understand why you can't provide the same service for free online.

It is obviously impossible to provide online advice which comes even close to the levels of advice you can offer specific cases. It is also clearly unacceptable to do so. In professional terms advice needs to be tailored to a specific case, and in business terms the advice you provide is your main product and should be paid for.

When practices attempt to provide veterinary advice online they tend to end up with pages peppered with "take it to the vet". Even the best intentioned end up looking as if they are blatantly touting for custom.

It is frustrating for visiting clients when, promised pet advice, they fail to find anything covering their specific species, breed and problem. If you are going to provide pet advice then you should do it properly. Let's see what this means. We'll look at a small animal example but the same would apply to equine, large animal or mixed practices.

Go into any bookstore or pet shop. Find the petcare books. Never mind the number of titles, just measure the length of dedicated shelving. Even the smallest pet shop will manage a metre of books. Allowing a conservative 200 sides of paper per cm that's 20,000 pages. Web pages hold less information than the printed page so double that to get a total of 40,000 web pages to match a moderate library of pet care. Even with robust allowances for duplicate information, material outside the scope of a veterinary web site and the thickness of the covers you still end up with thousands of web pages - and each page needs writing, each page needs illustrating and the whole lot needs glueing together with the links that make the web work.

If you created the thousands of pages of advice, would it attract visits from your existing clients? Maybe. Would it attract regular repeat visits from them? Unlikely. You could extend, but not refresh the content of your web site. People would appreciate the reference material your site would provide - but few would be your existing clients.

Straightforward pages of veterinary advice don't look like a viable option for content, let's look at an online store.

Let's measure some more shelves, this time pet products in your local supermarket. Even modestly sized stores display four hundred shelf feet of assorted pet products. Throw in product ranges that were once only seen in specialist shops and vets, own brand products at loss leader pricing points, online ordering and a delivery service with evening deliveries. Would you really want to compete?

Several large online pet stores, selling directly or through vets, were set up in the nineties with the aim of cashing in on the valuable pet food and accessory market. Their business model was generally based on central warehousing and national distribution. They have almost all gone under, some quite spectacularly. There are only a couple of survivors left in the UK.

In any case, an online store set up just to serve your clients is likely to be all work and little profit by the time you deal with deliveries and returns. This is not to say that you can't promote products available in your waiting room online, just that an online shop as *raison d'être* for a practice web site is not a viable approach.

So, let's look at content that does work.

1.12 Local content in more detail

Locally based articles can be created in formats borrowed from a wide range of media. Copy can be pitched at audiences of various ages and with various levels of education and can carry serious messages as easily as light hearted pieces.

There are obvious parallels with local newspapers. Straightforward reportage is very flexible for newsy stories – a report about a client visiting your surgery or a piece about the results when you judged the pet show at the local fete – spelling peoples name right is much more important than correct grammar.

Take a leaf out of specialist magazines to create interest pieces about the equipment you use or the procedures you undertake. Reading a piece that has been written with enthusiasm for a subject gets through to people, even when they have no direct understanding of the bit of kit involved. They may gain some small understanding of the item you are writing about but will also get a vivid impression of how much you enjoy your subject and your work.

A diary format is effective – so long as entries are maintained – and has the added advantage that it encourages repeat visits. An ongoing account of any member of staffs' day or week will attract followers. It might even help keep your nurse trainees up to date with their portfolios!

Many of the articles you produce can be recycled. Today's article about a kitten being microchipped can be repeated in a few weeks time with a dog instead. Later in the year a rabbit, later still a llama. The subject of the article in each case is the animal rather than the micro-chipping so this won't be seen as repetition but each instance allows you to promote the service anew.

Even the most routine of consultations can be turned into an article that will attract clients, can include an opportunity to promote animal care and offer a chance for product placement. Take a simple kitten vaccination. Kittens have built in "ahhh" factor to start with. A simple introduction of kitten and owner can be accompanied with a short paragraph about the advantages of vaccination or the perils of kitten ownership. Talk about the cost of vaccination or add a bit about kitten food.

It is easy to find opportunities to promote new products and your more innovative services. It is just as easy to do the same for existing products and the services you have always offered. Write a brief piece showing a client taking advantage of the product – get a testimonial possi-

bly – and link to a page with full information about the product or service.

Promoting improved animal care among your clients is much more effective when demonstrated through real examples than by way of page after page of advice. Suppose you are presented with a local rabbit with overgrown incisors. An article about the rabbit can include how this happens, why it happens, what you do and what other owners can do to recognise and minimise the problem. Later, with a new article about a different rabbit, you can repeat and reinforce the advice in a way that is impossible with straightforward advice pages.

1.13 Local content at work

Local content doesn't only work for pets. News about horse cases will attract the equine community over their larger catchment area. Farmers aren't immune to the pleasures of reading about their neighbours.

Putting local content online won't only draw your clients. It will also attract visits from the broader community you serve. This will help give your practice a good name more generally.

Once your visitor numbers grow your clients are quite likely to request to be included on your web site. You can turn this into an advantage – get them to do some of the work. If you are producing a report about a case then ask them for a picture of the subject, for a testimonial or for their own account. If you are judging the pet show at the local fete ask the organiser to find a volunteer to photograph the winners and collect their names.

Images are essential for a web site. When you are providing local content then images are, in many ways, easier to create than when you are trying to illustrate more general content. Quality is less important than content – a fuzzy image is forgiven so long as the subject remains recognisable. With modern digital cameras images are both easy and inexpensive to gather. When you take the pictures issues of copyright don't arise

Last weeks news may end up in the litter tray in the homes of its readership – in the papers' offices last weeks news is carefully stored in the archives. You can take the same approach on your web site. You should create a “current edition” where all the latest information is easily found and presented all together. There should also be an archive that pages move to as they go out of date.

As material is moved to the archive section of your site the search engines will see a growing resource with a consistent theme. They like this. Your site ranking will gradually improve.

By adding a search facility to your archive it will become a useful resource for clients looking for snippets of advice they remember from weeks or months earlier.

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. 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 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 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.

3.00 Nitty Griitty Web Design

There are important differences between a web page and the same information on print. This section looks at the most important of the multitude of design considerations which have to be taken into account to build an effective web site.

3.01 Web technologies

Lets take a brief look at the basic building blocks that make up your practices presence on the Internet. A domain name and web site.

Your online identity is based on your web address, your domain name. This serves the same purposes online as your name, address and telephone number in the real world.

A domain name looks like mypractice.com or mypractice.co.uk – note that it doesn't start with www.

With www in front your domain name becomes a web address - www.myppractice.co.uk .

Add someone@ in front and it becomes an e-mail address - someone@myppractice.co.uk

At one time a .com domain name ending was considered essential. It didn't matter where your business was actually located. As the number of UK users increased this changed. Now, for businesses located in the UK and serving clients in the UK, a .co.uk domain is the essential, the .com optional.

You register your chosen domain name with a central registrar. For .co.uk domains this is Nominet - a not for profit company based on Oxford. Your registration runs for two years at a time and you automatically get the option to renew. If you fail to renew the name stops working and becomes available for someone else to register.

Once registered, you have exclusive rights to create a web site or allocate e-mail addresses based on your domain. It is important to ensure that the domain is registered in your practice name – not in the name of your web design or hosting company.

When VetsFriend went into receivership they had registered a large number of practice domain names to themselves rather than the practices concerned. These vets found that their web site disappeared and their e-mail addresses stopped working. They couldn't gain control of their domain names as the names “belonged” to the defunct company. These domains are in limbo, waiting until the original registration period ends and they one again become available for registration

Your web site needs to live on a computer connected permanently to the Internet. You could do this with a computer in the corner of your surgery – but usually you rent a bit of computer space with a hosting company. Hosting companies continually monitor their computers – properly called servers – and have a variety of backups and redundancies so that problems are minimised and your site is continually online.

Your web site is simply a collection of computer files. There are dozens of programs, no more difficult to use than a wordprocessor, that you can use to create your web pages. If you have a member of staff with a talent for design you could largely create and maintain your site in-house – though this can become expensively time consuming.

To present a fully professional face to the internet, you will probably want to use the services of a web design company. Lets consider what you need to look out for.

3.02 Using a web designer

You can't just wave your chequebook at a web design company and expect a fully functional web site to fit and forget. This is your business you are promoting. You understand how it works and how it relates to your clients. You need to be fully involved in the development of your site and you need to maintain a monitoring role to check that your practice is gaining the expected benefits.

Your clients, potential or existing, don't come to your site to admire the quality of the graphics or the layout of your pages. They come for the content. They come for information about your practice, products and services. The design of your practice web site should be driven by the presentation of relevant, quality content and not by other factors.

When you commission a web design company to create your web site it is all too easy to lose the focus on content. The resulting site is generally less effective, less flexible and often more expensive. At the moment that a web design company is commissioned, quality content is rarely sitting neatly filed in the practice office. Quality content is time consuming to create. The web design company will be pressing for the delivery of content so that they can get on with their part of the process. The temptation is to quickly produce enough content for the web design company to get going - minimum number of words and poor or no graphics.

Now to look at the problem from the web designers' point of view. They're on a deadline. They want to produce a site that looks good. They want to get paid. They want you to recommend them to other practices. They don't have enough copy to fill the pages. They don't have enough graphic material from your practice to make that the visual focus. The web design company has little choice but to create a page with a strong visual focus on the graphics they create and reduced space allocation for the abbreviated copy you provide for the sake of speed.

The final web site the practice signs off in this situation is generally visually attractive and displays the limited practice copy to best advantage. It will actually look like a “proper” web site because this is a universal problem and doesn't just apply to vets. Later, if you should actually get round to extending your copy, you will find that the visual focus on the designer produced graphics

and the reduced page area available makes it less effective. Really, you should start again, but after spending all that money

Before commissioning a design company, develop the content. Both text and graphics. Creating and linking basic web pages is easy - it can be done in most word processors nowadays - and it is a good test of the content. If it works as a basic text based site then your content is good. The typographic and graphic skills of a web design company can then be employed to lift the site and present the material to best advantage.

If you start by creating your content as text then you are unlikely to end up with a site crowded with superfluous graphics. Instead of adding design elements in order to fill the page you only add them when they enhance the presentation of your content.

Don't be frightened of open spaces on your web site. Whitespace - called that even when it is puce or purple - is the name given to areas without text or images. Used intelligently whitespace will frame and present your content, lifting it from the page.

3.03 Usability

If your site is easy for your visitors to use they will find the information they are looking for, feel confident moving around your site and stay to look around.

If your site is difficult to use your visitors will fail to find what they are looking for, feel uncomfortable and probably leave your site quite quickly.

A monitor screen isn't a piece of paper. Over hundreds of years paper pages have evolved to a universal tall and narrow format. Along comes the computer and all that is thrown out in favour of short and wide. For easier reading your pages should be laid out to shape text in to taller and narrower areas. Fitting your navigation links into a tall narrow column down one side of the page helps.

Your web designer will probably demonstrate your new site on a large, high resolution, state of the art monitor. With the growth in the popularity of laptops, pda's and internet connected mobile phones, as well as people using legacy equipment, your visitors may well be viewing your site through a much small and lower resolution window. Check that your site still works.

People don't like scrolling down through text - so avoid making them. Break text into separate pages once it needs more than two "page down" clicks to reach the bottom.

Help them keep their place by breaking text into short paragraphs with whitespace between them and by giving each paragraph a heading.

The lower part of a web page, the bit that isn't displayed when the page first loads, is said to be "below the fold" - a newspaper term for stories on the lower part of the front page and so not visible on the newsvendors display. People make decisions about whether to scroll down or to go elsewhere on the basis of what they see

"above the fold". The visible copy should make clear what joys are hiding lower down the page.

Your visitors will have come to your site to find out about your practice, not to spend time working out how to get from page to page. All the links on your site, including those in the text, should have the same appearance. You don't have to follow the accepted standard of underlined and blue so long as your choice stands out from the rest of your text. You could just underline all links - so long as no other text is underlined.

Keep the main navigation links in the same place, in the same order and in the same style. You want to make people comfortable as they use your site and an important part of this is for them to know where they are and where they are going. If you keep swiveling the signposts they lose confidence.

If visitors have to scroll your main navigation links off the top of the screen to read your content you should either repeat the links at the bottom of the page or provide a link to take them back to the top.

If your main navigation links aren't text based - if they are based on images or scripted effects - then you should provide a text only alternative for visitors who have those effects turned off. Some of the latest ways to access the internet - pda's or mobile phones for instance - have limited abilities to display some of these web page technologies.

3.04 Accessibility

Addressing accessibility issues helps your site to be seen and appreciated by the maximum number of people. As a bonus, a site that is fully accessible for all users is also fully accessible to the search engines.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) was founded by the inventor of the web, Tim Berners-Lee, in 1994. It has long term goals for the Web and for Universal Access. Its' target is:

" To make the Web accessible to all by promoting technologies that take into account the vast differences in culture, languages, education, ability, material resources, access devices, and physical limitations of users on all continents "

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are provided by W3C to help web designers make pages fully accessible. If a site conforms to the guidelines it can display a dated conformance claim on its pages i.e.

" This site conforms to WCAG 1.0. Level A 4 April 2004 "

The guidelines don't expect you to produce sites that look any different. A normal user is unlikely to notice the difference. The guidelines do require you to present your information in an alternative way when it makes it easier for someone to read who is using an older computer, a

very new phone or adaptive technologies like text to speech converters or tactile braille displays.

Example guideline

From Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0

“For non-text content, provide text equivalents that serve the same purpose or convey the same information as the non-text content, except when the sole purpose of the non-text content is to create a specific sensory experience (for example, music and visual art) in which case a text label or description is sufficient.”

Example in practice

Each image on your web site can be associated with an “ALT” tag – a block of text, displayed as your cursor hovers over a picture in some browsers. The guidelines specify that alt text has to be present for the benefit of those who can't see the picture – maybe because they are blind and using a text reader or maybe because they are using a mobile phone built into a watch.

The text shouldn't simply describe the image. It should replace the function of the image in the page. A right pointing arrow, clearly understandable as a link to the next page in a series, should be labeled “next page” not “arrow”.

3.05 Disability Discrimination Act

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 comes into full force in October 2004 and has implications for the design of practice web sites.

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) have issued a Code of Practice to go with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The new code, while not having direct force of law, provides guidelines that Courts will refer to in the case of a dispute.

The DRC code refers to web sites specifically, showing them to be within the scope of the act. They also make it clear that all web sites accessible to the public are included, whether they are selling something or simply providing information.

The new code itself only offers very broad guidelines to what is needed to ensure that a web site conforms? There seems to be a general agreement developing that the guidelines to follow are those from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Web sites should follow these in order to make their content available to any user. Conformance Level "A" - their least taxing set of standards - is becoming accepted as the minimum.

The Disability Discrimination Act doesn't provide any central authority that can bring an action against a web site owner - it requires a specific complaint by a particular user, disabled within the terms of the Act, to demonstrate that the web site failed to provide a service matching that provided for users without that particular disability. The description of disability included in the code is fairly wide ranging however so there are plenty of possible opportunities to offend.

Any practice commissioning a web site from now on should expect to get a site that complies with the spirit of the Act. If a practice gets a complaint about accessibility then they should have a come back on the designer. Early compliance with the act brings a reward - sites that do so are much easier for search engine robots to index and gain higher rankings in search results - until everyone is compliant of course.

3.06 Speed

Broadband Internet has arrived, does it matter if your web site is slow to load? The answer has to be, most emphatically, yes it does.

How quickly should a web page be displayed? This is highly subjective, different people have widely spread levels of tolerance to delay. Best to satisfy the maximum number so assume that your visitors don't have time to waste.

When someone clicks on a link to your page, there is a degree of anticipation. They are quite likely to hold their breath subconsciously. Try it. How long does it take until you become aware that you are holding your breath and have to make the decision to breath again? Generally five to ten seconds. All very unscientific - but it feels about right empirically.

Broadband is being promoted heavily but is still not universally available and remains expensive. Assume that your visitors will be using a standard modem. Newer technologies, particularly mobile phones, connect at speeds comparable to a modem

New modems are rated at 56k, 56000 bits per second. The "56K" is a marketing term and represents the theoretical maximum if there was zero length telephone line between the modem and the exchange. Users living close to their exchange and connected by recently installed lines may achieve speeds around 42-46K. If the user is distant from their exchange, if the lines are old or been chewed by the cat, if they have poorly installed extensions, if they are using a long telephone extension lead, if they have other phones connected to the same line. Any or all of these will create interference on the phone line. A realistic estimate of connection speed is half the headline – just 28.8K

How does 28.8K relate to the time taken for a web page to download? 28800 bits per second is 3600 characters per second - each character takes 8 bits. 3600 or 3.6K is directly related to the size of files on your computer.

A 3.6K file should therefore take 1 second to be transferred with a modem operating at 28.8K.

There are several overheads. Additional data has to be sent and received as the modems talk to each other. Whole blocks of data may be lost as the modems attempt to step up the speed but fail. Probably no more than a 3K file will actually be transferred in a second.

So, if your page is going to display in less than ten seconds, how large can it be. At 3K a second it needs to be less than 30K. To display the page completely this has

to include all the graphics as well. You can get a lot of text on a 30K page. With careful optimising 30K can represent a reasonable amount of graphic content as well. This limit doesn't mean bare pictureless pages by any means.

If you start with a text only version of a page you will find that it loads like lightning. Staying under a ten second load time you will generally have over 20K available for images – that is a generously sized photo at a presentable quality.

On the other hand, If your page has an overhead of java effects, logos, background images and border graphics you will only be able to include a small, low resolution version of the same image.

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.

5.00 Communication Technologies

E-mail is the most popular online technology. It is commonly given as the main reason for people getting online. In this section we will look at how e-mail works. We will also look at other new communication technologies which may prove useful.

5.01 What is available

There are a range of communication technologies that work over the internet. Let's look at some of the alternatives to e-mail.

Messengers

To communicate using an instant messaging program both parties have to be connected to the internet and both have to be running compatible software on their respective computers. Messages appear in a pop up window as soon as they are sent and conversations can continue as alternating sentences continually visible to both parties. If there was a single flavour of instant messaging program the technology would be more widely useful but there are several versions from different providers. This is their main disadvantage.

Web chat

Web chat is similar to instant messaging but works through a web page. Both parties need to be connected to the internet in order to exchange messages. You need some special software but the client you are talking to just needs a web browser. Lots of sites use a web chat program to provide technical support. There are possible applications for a practice web site including making appointments or for clients to request advice.

Conference

Instant messaging and web chat can be set up to work with multiple users simultaneously.

Texts

It is possible to both initiate and receive text messages, as sent between mobile phones in their billions, over the internet. To do so you need a subscription to a specialised service. Text messages have become widely used and accepted as a means of communication and you will certainly find a percentage of your clients happy to receive information that way.

The message "Spot is due for his vaccination, please call the surgery on 01234 567890 to make an appointment. The Vets" only uses half the available message length, and is cheaper to send than a postcard. Entering a text message through your computer is much easier than with the fiddly buttons of a mobile phone and much of the process can be automated.

Voicemail and fax by email

Another subscription service can make your fax machine and answering machine redundant and free up an existing phone line. You are allocated a new phone number for fax and voicemail. When someone sends you a fax or leaves you a message they appear as attachments to e-mails. Messages come out of your computer speakers. Faxes appear on your computer screen. These can be collected at any computer and can be sent on, copied, printed off and archived.

Voip

This is a developing technology that will carry voice messages over the internet. A subscription is required and the main marketing thrust will no doubt be based on potential savings on your phone bill. One to watch.

Bulletin boards and newsgroups

These are an area on your web site where authorised users can put a message online for others to access and comment upon. We include them as they have potential for a private advice area for your clients. Clients with a question go to your bulletin board and "post" the details of their problem. You, or one of your staff, visit periodically and post relevant advice in return.

E-mail lists

These are a variation on the bulletin board above. Instead of having to go to the board to post a query, clients simply send it as an e-mail to the list. The list then copies this to all subscribers. Your response is also sent as an e-mail to the list and again copied to all subscribers. A conversation can continue by simply replying to the list in the same way as you reply to any e-mail. An active mailing list can act as a useful focus for members of your local community and provide you with an opportunity to promote your products and services.

Web-cam

A web cam is a video camera that sends pictures over the internet. With a broadband connection these can be of reasonable quality. There are possible uses in monitoring patients. The video feed can be made private to vets and nursing staff only. The ward needn't fill with wires as there are effective wireless versions available.

5.02 E-mail plus and minus

E-mail has become the universal means of electronic communication and the most popular online technology. Let's look at its advantages and drawbacks.

The main advantage of e-mail for both the sender and the recipient is convenience. When you send an e-mail, you can do so at a time to suit your routine. The person you are sending it to can collect it when they have the time. A phone call, by way of comparison, demands that both parties find time simultaneously. You may have a quiet moment but your client is missing a favourite soap.

You've got a full waiting room when your client has put the baby to bed.

E-mail has developed its own syntax. Recipients expect information in a succinct form. Creating an e-mail when you have a brief message to send can be the work of moments. Many longer messages, sent regularly, can be simply copied and edited to suit the specific recipient.

When you have a longer message, or when a client has a broader query, then the process of creating an e-mail can help to get the point you wish to make set out clearly. The recipient has the whole text to refer back to as well – unlike the misunderstandings common to telephone conversations.

E-mails create their own record – unlike phone calls which may require you to take notes for the patient record.

The popularity of e-mail has meant that the technology has attracted the attentions of various parties with their own agenda.

Unsolicited commercial e-mails, commonly known as spam, have reduced some of the convenience of e-mail by adding a lot of time-wasting noise to everyone's mailboxes. Spam works because the e-mails are so cheap to send, effectively free, that it only takes one person in millions to buy a product to make it worthwhile. Meanwhile the other millions minus one have to assess the message and wear out their delete button. Spam filtration is getting better and legislation is attempting to deal with the problem but there will probably always be a background level of spam to ignore.

Basic e-mail is just a text file and can't do your computer any harm. Viruses, the e-mail born variety anyway, are carried in attachments to a basic e-mail and have to be run as programs on your computer before they can drop their payload. Html e-mail, that's e-mail that displays with coloured fonts, backgrounds and borders, is effectively an attachment that runs automatically and used to be a major route for viruses. Nowadays the virus writers have to develop psychological tricks to get recipients to click on attachments before they will run. You should ensure that any computer used to collect e-mail has a virus scanning program running – and that its virus definitions are up to date

5.03 How e-mail works

Understanding the basic building blocks that make up an e-mail system can help you get the most out of it in practice. Lets take the process in stages and follow an e-mail

An e-mail is just a computer file which you create in your mail program. When you click your send button your computer sends a copy of your e-mail to the domain name in the recipients e-mail address. This is a transaction very similar to your visiting a web page except that, instead of a web page coming to your computer, your e-mail goes to the recipients mail box.

A mailbox is just a block of filespace on an internet connected computer where a copy of each e-mail received is kept.

When you collect mail your computer connects to the distant computer where your mailbox is set up. This, again, is very like your browser collecting a web page. First it collects a list of the e-mails you have waiting. Then it downloads them to your computer one by one.

Collecting each e-mail still leaves copies remaining in your mailbox. Your computer has to send a specific instruction after downloading each item before they are deleted. This ensures that, if something goes wrong, there is a second chance to download it. You can turn the delete signal off. This is very useful if you want to collect e-mail from more than one computer. One at home and another at the surgery for instance. Collect e-mails at home but don't delete them from your mailbox. Collect them again the next day in the surgery so that you have a complete record on one computer.

Any e-mail you send can be copied to as many people as you like. Most mail programs let you set up groupings of your contacts so that you can mail them all at once. Be careful. Most options allow each recipient to see the e-mail addresses of everyone else you sent the mail to. This is alright if you are all working on a common project but far from satisfactory if you want to e-mail a block of your clients.

When you have a domain name for your practice you have exclusive rights to the huge number of possible e-mail addresses it is possible to create from it. It would be tiresome to have to set up mailboxes for every address you wanted to use. This is where forwarders come in. They act like a mailbox and receive mail but don't store it. They immediately send it on, forward it, to another mailbox.

By setting up a catch-all forwarder you can use any e-mail address created from your domain name. Any mail that isn't claimed by an existing mailbox or forwarder is sent on to one persons mailbox. You can use an e-mail address to, for instance, track an advertising campaign, and know that responses won't just disappear.

If e-mail could only transmit brief text messages it wouldn't have become universal. Attachments are simply computer files, any kind of file, and you can send them along with your basic message. You can send wordprocessor documents or digital photos, sound files or movies. If you can store it on a computer you can send it as an attachment.

You can make your e-mails pretty with bright colours, fancy fonts, backgrounds, graphics and images. You can even add sounds. This is all very well when you know that the person you are sending it to appreciates such things and has their computer set up to display all the effects. A lot of people don't and when your message arrives it isn't displayed. The pretty effects rely on the recipients computer running other programs apart from the basic e-mail display window. This is the kind of behaviour that viruses love. Most of the loopholes that

virus writers found have now been closed off and html mail, the proper name for the pretty version, probably poses little threat. There is still a residual reaction that means there are lots of people who only accept text e-mail.

5.04 Newsletters, etc

Do you post reminders to your clients as their animals come due for their annual booster, how much does that cost and how much could you save by sending reminders by e-mail?

If you could communicate with your clients between annual visits could you encourage better animal care and usefully promote your products and services.

You can collect e-mail addresses with a form on your web site, with a printed form in your waiting room and you can get your staff to ask clients for an e-mail address at reception.

It is essential to avoid accusations of sending spam. You must ensure that every e-mail address on your list has made a positive choice to join. The process is known as "double opt in". First, a client provides you with an e-mail address either online or in the surgery. Before adding them to your list you send them an e-mail asking them to confirm that they want to be included. You only add them to your list if they reply in the affirmative.

Newsletter

Like a printed newsletter, you collect up snippets of news and create seasonal articles and publish them all together periodically. This could be weekly, monthly or quarterly depending on the available resources.

You'll need three versions of your newsletter. One to be printed on paper for use in the waiting room, one as a web page for your web site and one to send as an e-mail.

Mailing lists

A mailing list can be thought of as a short newsletter. Instead of having to collect enough material to fill a couple of pages, interesting news or a special offer can be sent to your clients by e-mail straight away. With a bit of additional effort you can focus your mailings – send special deals on cat food just to cat owners, important information about cattle health only to the appropriate farms.

Site updates

You may be updating your web site regularly but your clients are probably forgetting to come along to take a look. If you can sign them up for notification of site updates then, every time you put new material online you can let them all know by e-mail.

Vaccination reminders

This is the only facility that we have found that actually guarantees you real savings on post, stationery and staff time. Each client that opts for e-mailed vaccination reminders will need details of their pets and the relevant

dates entered into the database – though the information can be extracted from most practice management systems. You still need to maintain a watch for deceased animals. Once set up vaccination reminders can be sent at the click of a mouse.

6.00 Summary

The growing number of people using the internet means that you will need to develop an effective web presence, if not immediately then fairly soon.

There are three main areas to consider.

First

There is a growing commercial imperative to ensure that your potential clients, as they transfer their allegiance from printed directories to the search engines, are easily able to find details of your surgeries online.

Second

You need to consider what online services you are going to provide for your existing clients. If you already create a newsletter or write articles for your local press then these will translate fairly readily into web content. If you don't then you need to decide if developing your site content for the benefit of your existing clients is going to provide your practice with a reasonable return.

Finally

You need to investigate how to integrate the new communication technologies into the daily routine of your surgery. Your clients are probably already wishing that they could e-mail you with a query before leaving for work rather than having to give up their break to phone.

Comments, queries and criticism

We would appreciate your feedback, positive or negative, on any aspect of this suite of articles. You can e-mail us or contact us using the details below.