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The Revenue Impact of Online Search Engine Marketing Technology for Medical Clinics

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Introduction, Research, and Outcomes

After several years of researching online recruiting and marketing techniques, studying the area of Internet marketing, and consulting with companies regarding search engine ranking, we have made many observations about the evolution of Internet Technology as a tool for marketing for doctors. Specifically, this paper addresses the use of Search Engine Placement Strategy to target elective procedure patients and obtaining the enrollment of new patients from the Internet.

Problem: The influx of technology has affected the use of hard copy and traditional media as a venue to promote elective procedures. As an example, the ROI, Return on Investment, for dermatologists and cosmetic surgeons using a phone book advertisement in a major US market has gone from 8:1 down to 2:1 in the last 10 years. Many medical practices established websites with a sizeable investment in design, production, and functionality; however, the websites for many of these firms have been unproductive.

Solution: Some practices have implemented a Search Engine Ranking and Marketing Campaign by using professional assistance to insure that their sites are in the top results for blind searches. The anonymous ABC Clinic utilized professional Search Engine Optimization techniques such as: specific pay for performance listings, professionally created web design and site navigation, along with many of the suggestions listed in this paper to create a regional and national presence using web technology and interactive media.

Results: The technological and marketing strategies below were used to facilitate a vastly improved ROI and Increase in Revenues for the ABC Clinic.

In years, 1999, 2000, and 2001, ABC Clinic maintained a relatively flat growth rate in a top 5 US market during what has been called a economic boom and had an existing web site with no traffic. Since new technological web marketing strategies have been incorporated, the ABC clinic has improved Gross Revenues in 2002 by 40% and Net Income is up 50% for the 9 months ending on October 1st, 2002. The impact has been unimaginable, and the ABC Clinic is seeing about 100 Internet Based Patients per Month. ABC Clinic has already garnered roughly 3 million dollars of Internet Tracked income for the last 7 quarters of year 2002 and 2003.

As for web site visitors, ABC Clinic has 1 home website and 3 individual doctor sites. At the beginning of the year 2002, the sites produced less than 50 thousand hits per month. Now the three sites produce about 2 million hits per month and 20,000 visitors sessions per month. Some of this traffic must take into consideration these factors: conversion of visitor to customer, visits from competitors or other doctors, job seekers, time lag from viewer to customer; other viewers such as webmasters looking for content, benchmarking, or research. Therefore, traffic is not everything, but the tracked dollars spent by Internet driven customers is excellent at this time. Thus, we are basing the impact purely on the results of successful improvement of: gross income, net income, patients who state that they found the clinic on the Internet, and return on investment.

The Top Search Engines and Algorithm Variables

Your Clinic website should be easily found by the potential surgery candidates on targeted search engines or directories while considering these factors:

- **The Top Engines**: If you go to http://www.searchenginewatch.com™ you will find the Net Ratings which will explain the market share of the following search engines and directories along with exposure and overlap of surfers. See Jupiter Media Metrix Ratings™. Yahoo™, MSN™, AOL™, Google™, InfoSpace™, AskJeevest™, Overture™, and a few others have the widest appeal to the potential recruiting market. If you follow the search engine industry, the growth or decline of search engine and directory "market share" has been very dynamic as show on searchenginewatch.com (Search Engine Watch, 2003).

- **Variables:** such as domain name, keyword rich text, and meta tags in the html source code affect your clinic exposure dramatically (Roy, 2003; Kytnin, 2002). Search engines use different methods (Algorithms) of listing your web sites and ranking them when a term or word search is done for "Cosmetic Surgery, New York, or California". Positive variables include: the name of your domain and if it is germane to the search terms, the title of the page, the meta tags which include you site description and keywords, the text and content of the page, image file names, alt tag text, and link popularity (Bruemmer, 2002a). As a note, the search engines and directories change the algorithms and ranking criteria from time to time. Some major engines use a partner to provide their search results, and the partner can change from time to time. Thus, the variables and algorithms are not static and IT, webmasters, and medical clinics need to actively watch and innovate search engine ranking strategy (1st on the List Promotion, 2002).

- **Pay for Inclusion or Pay Per Performance Engines and Programs**: Yahoo™ and Overture™ have become increasingly important to website performance and targeted visitors. Many search engines such as Looksmart™ (which provides results for MSN™) and Overture™ which sponsors results for Yahoo have suddenly become a strategy to outrank the webmasters because you have paid per click for your visitor and sponsored a listing on the first page of search results (Looksmart Directory Listings, 2003; Overture Search Performance, 2003).

- **Your Domain Name and Web Address**: A fair percentage of your web visitors will locate your home page by simply typing the name of the clinic or doctor into the browser coupled with dot com. The domain name and marketing of your home page is addressed in later in this article.

The Nature of the Customer & How to Target the Market Using Technology

Exposure to Patients and Potential Customer Pool

The customer of today is much more inclined to use the Internet to research elective surgery. It is the nature of the Internet Culture for the new generations (Pastore, 2002). They will research and visit clinics from the comforts of their home or the library. In light of this, you may have a more informed patient and customer.

Discussions with recent patients reveal that many enjoy the degree of privacy in searching and evaluating doctors and clinics online much like young adults search for colleges (Hartigan, 2002). There is less interaction with people using this method, and the private nature of elective surgery is somewhat conducive to the Internet. They simply need to review the site, evaluate the clinic, preview the before and after photos, and fill out the consultation form online or call your 800 number to receive any other information.

Marketing The Company Online: Benefits, Features, & Search Keywords

It is the job of the medical entity to integrate the information below with all web pages related to the clinic's website and marketing. However, there is a potential linguistics issue because patients may be searching for breast implants or nose job when the doctor or clinic site uses traditional terms in their text and web code such as Enhancement or some type of ..Plasty (Sivasubramanian, 2002). In sum, the practices must target the search engine "terms of art or key-phrases" that patients may use in seeking out a doctor (NetLogix, 2002).

Partial list of key departments and phrases

- Board Certification of Doctors
- Education
- Publications
- Licenses and Safety in Procedures
- Types of Procedures
- Before and After Photos
- Testimonials if Legally Ethical (White, 2002).
- Specific Elective Surgery

- Patient Coordinators
- Accolades
- Maps and Directions
- Consultation Forms and Brochures
- Milestones and Innovations
- About the Clinic
- Disclaimers and Waivers
- Staff and Facilities

Other Variables that Affect the Customer and Effective Use of Technology

Hard Copy that Promotes Recruiting and Branding to the Online Prospects.

Most clinics have facilitated a campaign to include the website or web address with contact information on every piece of hard copy or email that is sent from the Clinic. The issue overlooked is "what is the ease of recall" of the web name. In essence, the producers of marketing copy may want to include a domain or mirror domain that uses a supplemental name or a dot com extension. Overall put your web address or URL on everything from brochures, to licensed products, to letterhead, and to uniforms (Bruemmer, 2002b).

Links and Link Popularity

Many search engines rank sites according to factors that include the amount of links that other sites have back to you. Some sites pick up all of your links; however, many search engines only observe hyperlinks to your clinic that are attached to text. Anyone affiliated with the clinic should be asked to add your link to their website as part of an ongoing business relationship.

Ease of Use

Marketing products and services on sites have always had challenges in incorporating the necessary information to promote themselves and the clinic. On the main page of the admission and recruiting site, you will want to illuminate benefits, procedures, doctor credentials or accolades, facilities, staff, safety, pricing, value, location, phone numbers, and contact names. You will certainly want to implement the use of online forms that your IT department can handle. However, the website will want to limit clutter also. Keep in mind, you want to sell your clinic, but doctor websites will also need to allow for the application to be harvested with ease and without too much distraction.

Arraying the information from the perspective of where the patient is in the "call to action" process makes a good deal more sense. For example, the following array of institutional information is "intuitive" to most seekers in the doctor selection process:

- General Information for Prospective Patients
- Online Brochures about Doctors, Facilities, Staff, Credentials
- Before and After Photos
- Online Consultation Forms
- Phone Numbers and Address

Also, clinics and practices should carefully market their Doctors and administrators. Many MDs specialize in certain fields that may attract patients who want to be treated by this noted physician. Savvy marketers capitalize on strategy by illustrating: the doctors training, their publications, and their renowned research in their respective field.

In constructing a website, it is critical for those responsible for design and content to assume the mindset of the patient – benefits need to be articulated and the connections that are intuitive to those inside the clinic must be clearly linked for those unfamiliar with the practice.

Search Engine Friendly Clinic Web Sites and Domains Contain These Attributes

- Title – The title of each web page should target specific web surfers.
- Meta Tags – These individualized tags should be in place on all clinic recruiting and other web pages. It doesn't matter how inconsequential the information on the page is. In essence, someone can discover you via any major subdirectory web page of the clinic.
- Content – The text of each page should be keyword rich with a target audience in mind.
- Headings – The headings and keyword rich text should be closest to the top left of the page and be carefully used throughout the rest of the page.
- URL Names and Extensions – The URL name is very important but the rest of the URL can have significance too. For example, http://www.1234cosmeticsurgeryonline.com/ breastaugmentationimplant.html Thus, this URL may be more likely to be picked up by a patient searching for Breast Augmentation.
- However, clinics need to maintain legal ethics in marketing while aggressively extolling the virtues of their services. For instance, your Webmaster could easily target a competitor's candidates by targeting code, keywords, and meta tags that would allow your site to rank when a patient is searching for another doctor in another region.
- Furthermore, it is vital to have a proper title, text, content, and meta tag information for each link and page that is listed on your home page.

Integrating Technology with Good Sense: Ease of Contact, Contact Us Pages, Response Times, and 800 numbers

If a patient comes to your site looking for an application to fill out or the patient is looking for an 800 number because most other firms have one, there may be a problem if you do not have this capacity. The ability to find the application form, fill it out, send it online, and receive a response, confirmation, or feedback is fundamental to improving upon your success. Moreover, your 800 number gives the customer a sense that they can contact you at any time without cost.

Some clinics may use auto responders that send specific information to patients who submit an email that has certain questions checked (in check boxes or radio buttons) in the submission (Auto responder Links and Information, 2002).

Load Time, Documents, Forms and Other Files

We all love beautiful graphics, pictures, fancy design and Flash (Macromedia, 2003). However, many Internet users who live in rural areas or who use an inexpensive computer system will use traditional dial up Internet services. The customer dial up system or ISP Internet Service Provider, may take 30-45 seconds to download your entire website home page. Due to time constraints, their patience may run out. Further, if the home page takes 30 seconds to load, and the next click for a brochure is in a format that can't be translated by the candidate's computer because they do not have the necessary installed applications, then you have definitely lost a prospect. For example, if the customer surfer has IE5 but all of your forms or other information are in Adobe, a higher version of Word or other, then the student may not have an hour to download the software to read your files. By in large, your site should offer information in several formats.

Links Back to Your Home Page

You should consult with your IT contacts about all other affiliated websites linking back to your site. This will increase your exposure and search engines will believe that your company is very popular because so many sites have a link reference to your firm!

Integration of Price and Financing Information

Each site should contain clear information about consulting about price, insurance, fees, or free consultations. Since many patients may self select out of further consideration solely on the basis of "published fees and price", websites should present information on typical financing. This approach may encourage some patients to initiate a dialogue that would have otherwise never taken place

Statistics and Statistical Software

Having access to an online password protected statistical information for your websites will help you track your progress from season to season. This information will explain what part of the world your visitors are coming from, what other sites are sending you traffic, what prospects download, the average amount of time visitors spend on your site, and other information such as in errors or outages on your site (Wilson, 2000).

Closing the Sale to your best Prospects online and in person: Use of Superlatives

The most important facet of internet recruiting is "closing of the sale". The use of superlatives in internet marketing is frowned upon by search engines. Thus, we should be careful using statements like, "The top doctor in the Region…" However, aggressive marketing copy on websites that utilizes credentials, benefits, accolades, board certifications, safety, and all other positive bullet points about your practice should be used with skill and care. In summary, Medical websites are doing their job if they are producing leads and applications. In the end, it is the firm's job to "close the sale" and enlist all extraordinary patients who are undecided, looking for financing, seeking out competition, and looking for a personal touch. Many patients simply want to be convinced of the opportunity and prestige that comes from obtaining your service.

Integration of online applications, online forms, and other submissions - Email and Other Customer Service: The use of email and the savings involved.

Having your brochure information and before and after photos online is a way to reduce hard copy expenses and use of paper. Similarly, these online brochures and forms can be a way for IT to harvest email addresses of other data for sending future mailings and updates. Email use by medical firms has increased savings in the area of postage, labor, paper, printing expenses, and administrative time. Some clinics and hospitals rejoice in the savings of some of their seasonal mass mailings. The question to be asked is how far the paperless office strategy can go, and will it become successful in all areas of enrollment management? (The Future of Paper in the Paperless Office, 2001).

Just a few years ago, institutions did not consider email a viable option for communicating with the prospect. Email addresses were difficult to harvest, volatile and only a small fraction of the prospective customers had such addresses. Today, email addresses are routinely collected by mailing list providers, and the addresses themselves are more stable and a much higher percentage of adults has such an address than just a few years ago. Email provides a low cost, high speed, communication mechanism for clinics and hospitals.

Several of the more popular applications of email in clinic recruitment are listed following

1) Distribution of text documents such as PDF files for information pertaining to your clinic, doctors, discounts, products, services, new technology and the like. 2) Notification of incomplete information to complete the registration for patient consultation or surgery 3) Invitations for sponsored events with built in RSVP mechanisms 4) Market research surveys 5) Newsletters containing information related to company events 6) Rich Text Format Email (see glossary)

The extent to which email is used is limited only by the creativity of the marketing department. Since the cost is extremely low, it is possible for your administration to be in constant, interactive contact with members of the target population.

Trademarks, Copyright Notices, Waivers, and Disclaimers:

For the purposes of marketing and ethics online, the medical operation and IT department should protect themselves in the area of intellectual property, trade names, trademarks, and copyrights. It is always advisable to have your legal advice which can provide the proper text, disclaimers, and marks to notify all visitors of potential violations and protections (Playboy Case, 1997; Kamarck, 1999).

As for disclaimers, all departments should clarify the use of email, address, name, and other information submitted along with general warranty clarification in using the website (Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, 2002). Intake may want to illuminate the contractual nature of any agreement with the clinic or particular doctor or other expectations. Moreover, the disclaimers and waivers should protect the doctors and clinics in all financial dealings with patients (California Department of Consumer Affairs, 2003).

Search Engine Submission Prices: Generally speaking, these are the major search engines and prices to obtain listing: Yahoo: $300; MSN 15 cents for sponsored result and click through from Looksmart or $30 dollars for basic listing in Inktomi; Google: free possible listings or use Google AddWords to sponsor a paid result; Overture: Bid for sponsored keywords for a result which may appear on results of Yahoo and AOL; DMOZ Open Directory is a free listing but must be carefully listed. These are just general examples. For dynamic pricing information see: yahoo.com, msn.com, looksmart.com, overture.com, google.com, http://www.inktomi.com/, dmoz.org, and aol.com. Note: All companies and tradenames listed herein are the trademarks and intellectual property of the mentioned company, search engine, or directory.

Overlooked Simple Add Ons

It is always advisable to consult with your webmasters and web design team to build the best site navigation, graphics, and search engine friendly site. However, making a site sticky is important too. Sticky just means to keep people in your site longer because your site is interesting and has captured the attention of the visitor. If you have a great site, it may be a good idea to add the features of 1) Add this site to your favorites or Bookmark this site so you can visit again; 2) Email this web address and site information to a friend (Gallogly et al., 2002). Moreover, if your clinic generally accepts a large percentage of Spanish speaking or other bilingual patients each year, it may be advisable for your websites to include clinic information in the mother tongue or foreign language.

Conclusions and Investment in This Marketing Management Technology

As a note, it is not clear that other medical specialties can benefit from this technology in the same way as elective surgery. People go to hospitals for emergencies. HMOs affect the doctor choice of the average American. Moreover, word of mouth is widely used to select a doctor such as an OBGYN. However, doctors and dentists in the elective areas generally have an opportunity to use this technology and strategy to grow a company or practice and improve revenues. Overall, these suggestions represent the basic internet marketing technology investments and alternatives for improved business opportunity, information dissemination, and web traffic exposure.

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