MD connect

THE MEDICAL MARKETER'S GUIDE TO WEB DESIGN

INDEX

INTRODUCTION

Across all industries, web design can make or break a user's experience with a brand. Visitors' perception of your website is directly related to their perception of your business. Poor web design can drive away customers, while innovative and user-friendly design can convert them.

For the healthcare industry, a strong web presence has become more important than ever before. Google receives more than one billion health-related search queries every day,[1] indicating that the vast majority of patients now seek health information online over any other source. To stand out amongst the competitors in these patients' search results, medical practices and hospitals must invest in a website that not only ranks well on search engine results pages (SERPs), but also keeps users engaged until they schedule an appointment.

We often talk about the importance of informative, SEO-friendly content, but great copy alone is not enough for medical marketers to attract new patients. A website's design – including everything from navigation to load speed to the use of color – has a profound impact on the user's perception of your brand, your trustworthiness as medical professionals, and ultimately, whether or not they'll choose your practice. In fact, the data bears this out: a study commissioned by Doctor.com reveals that 63% of users will choose one healthcare provider over another because of a strong web presence.[2]

So how do you go about crafting a visually appealing, high-performing healthcare website? The process begins before writing any code at all, with a careful consideration of the user experience and the features that will be most useful to potential patients. This guide explains the key components of designing a healthcare website and how medical marketers can implement best practices into new or existing sites.

[1] https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/healthcare-information-technology/google-receives-more-than-1-billion-health-questions-every-day.html

[2] https://www.doctor.com/cxtrends2018

WHY DOES WEB DESIGN MATTER?

Top-notch web design may not be first on the priority list for a medical marketing strategy, but think of it in terms of making a great first impression on potential patients. Would you show up to a job interview without showering or with wrinkled, ill-fitting clothing? Probably not: you'd want to present yourself in the best light, as a sophisticated and trustworthy professional.

The same goes for web design. Blue Corona reports that 48% of people consider web design to be the most important factor when determining the credibility of a business. Further, 38% of people will leave a website if the content or layout is unattractive[3].

As medicine becomes increasingly focused on a direct-to-patient business model, a strong website is more important than ever. Patients no longer solely rely on word of mouth to find medical care; reviews, "top doctor" roundups, search results, and social media are equally important sources of provider information. The link to your website will likely be the most-shared piece of information about your practice, and healthcare organizations should allocate resources to those websites accordingly.

Your website is your chance to show patients that you care about the way they perceive you, and that your hospital or practice is experienced and well-qualified. You put the time, effort, and resources into creating a user-friendly experience, a quality that patients can infer will extend into the service you provide as medical professionals.

In addition to enhancing your image for visitors, good web design acts as an "invisible hand," guiding users to the information they need and, ultimately, to conversion. Websites with an intuitive hierarchy, strong visual language, and clear focal points on every page are more effective at directing patients toward the intended call-to-action — whether that's requesting more information or calling your office to schedule an appointment.

Finally, user-friendly and mobile-optimized design helps your website rank better in search. While keywords and informative copy play an important role in SEO, website functionality is taken into consideration as well. Your website should be well-organized, tagged with the appropriate metadata, and full of relevant content so users can quickly find the answers to their questions. If visitors like your website, they are less likely to "bounce," or return to the search engine, which in turn improves your rankings.

> 48% of people consider web design to be the most important factor when determining the credibility of a business.

3 https://www.bluecorona.com/blog/20-web-design-facts-small-business-owners/

WEB DESIGN BEST PRACTICES FOR MEDICAL MARKETERS

Whether you're just starting out or looking to revamp your site, there are several elements you can focus on to improve the quality of your web design. We'll take a look at some of the most important factors for successful design, and offer some practical tips for implementing these strategies.

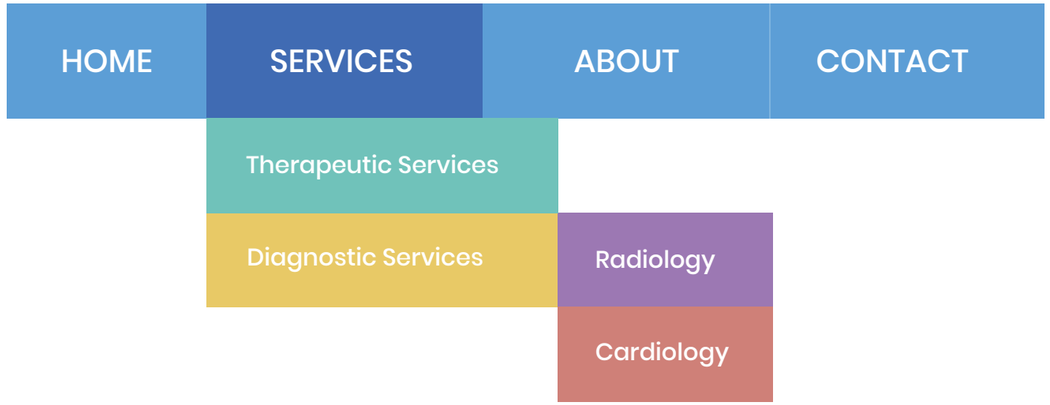
A Strong Sitemap

Like any creative project, your website needs an outline. After all, you wouldn't write a presentation or a white paper without determining what points you wanted to talk about first. For most website projects, the sitemap serves not only as the "outline" for your website content, but as the base organizational structure that will inform every other decision you make during the design and development phases of the project.

In addition to helping users navigate your site, sitemaps are a core component of SEO. The encoded version of your sitemap, usually created in extensible markup language (or XML), tells search engine crawlers how to classify and organize each page of your website. The XML sitemap file also communicates important information like page hierarchy, when and how frequently the page was last updated, and whether a page contains unique content.

Though you'll eventually need to create an XML sitemap file, you can start on paper or in a word document when creating your sitemap. First, sketch out the top-level navigation, or the items you'd want to immediately show up in the navigation bar of your website. The exact names of these items will vary depending on your business structure. But at the very least, your top-level navigation should contain information on the services your practice offers, information about your doctors, and an option for patients to contact the practice.

In the next level of navigation, you have more flexibility to feature the content that's important to your audience. For example, you could add one page for each doctor in your practice under the "About" section in your site's top-level navigation. Likewise, you could break down service categories under "Services."



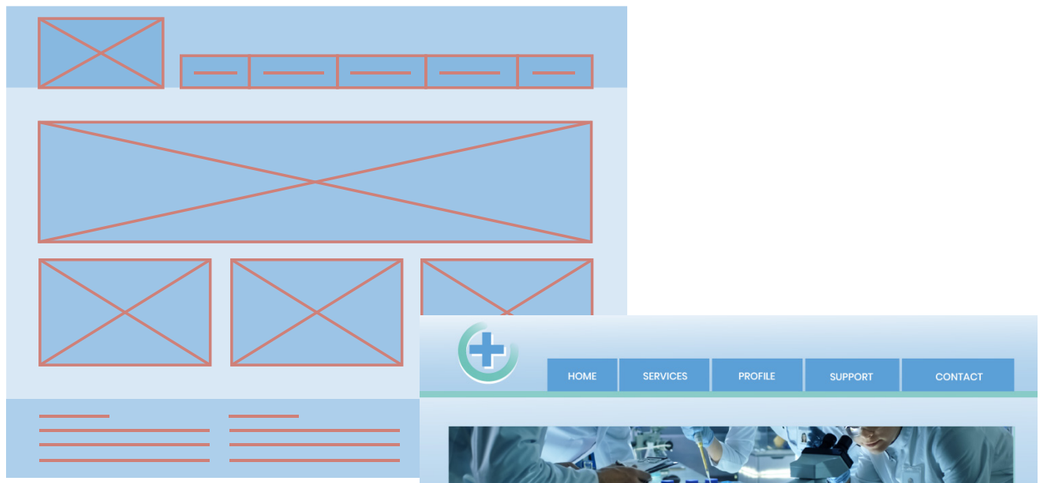
There may be some cases where you wish to have a third level of navigation. For example, if your medical practice offers two different types of procedures for weight loss surgery, you could create a navigation tab for each under "Weight Loss Surgery", which would then rest under "Services."

By laying out a strong sitemap before beginning design and development, you can be sure that your site will contain all required information and that your organizational structure makes sense.

Intuitive UX

Good design prioritizes the user experience (UX) above all. If your site looks great but is difficult to navigate, patients won't be able to find what they need and will leave for another site. UX begins with navigation: How many steps does it take to schedule an appointment, and how can your design naturally guide patients through those steps?

On a page-by-page level, consider how your content is organized. The contours of every page should make sense to the reader and present a natural flow of information. Creating a wireframe – a two-dimensional illustration of a webpage's layout – is standard practice before starting to build a website. Think of the wireframe as a sketch; it will allow you and your development team to move copy around, experiment with visual elements, and test the overall flow of a page before committing to coding any particular element.



UX includes everything about your website, down to the smallest details. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you're working on the UX:

- Does your website have the crucial information that users would be looking for, and is that information prominently featured in your navigation?

  This includes:
  - Contact and location information
  - A list of services you offer, or profiles of your medical professionals
  - Insurance information
  - A guide for new patients (what they'll need to bring to their first appointment, etc.)

- Is the most important information "above the fold", so patients don't have to scroll down to read it?

- Does the design clearly communicate that your organization provides healthcare services? Can the user determine what the website or webpage is about in under five seconds?

- Is your text legible across all devices?

- Are your CTAs large and prominent enough to command attention on the webpage?

- Is there a good balance of text to imagery?

- Do the colors, fonts, and icons you've used make sense?

- What's the balance of content to white space? Do any of the webpages feel cluttered or empty?

Responsive Design

More and more patients are using the internet to answer their medical questions and locate qualified healthcare providers. In fact, according to Pew Research Center, 59% of US adults had looked online for health information in the past year. [4]While many searches are still conducted on desktop, mobile usage continues to rise. Recent reports reveal that mobile search volume now exceeded that of desktop search. The vast majority of American (81%) now own smartphones and more than half own tablets (52%). This means that medical marketers need to meet patients on all the devices they're using on a daily basis.

The solution is responsive web design, which enables a site to adjust automatically to screen size.

[5]This means that it is always readable and user-friendly, no matter which device a patient is using. You've likely encountered a shrunken or illegible webpage on your smartphone and gotten frustrated trying to decipher the content. As you can imagine, patients are much less likely to convert if a site isn't mobile-friendly. In fact, Google reports that users are five times more likely to leave a site that has not been optimized for mobile. [6]It follows that responsive sites perform better on [7]search because they prioritize the user experience.

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Visual Hierarchy

Hierarchy is important for both website copy and design, as users tend to scan pages in an F-shaped pattern for text-heavy articles or a Z-shaped pattern for more image-heavy landing pages. Visual hierarchy serves to direct users' eyes and determine the order in which they view content. There are several ways to accomplish this, including playing with text size and negative space.

To encourage patients to read your content thoroughly and stay on your site longer, make selective use of color and compelling but consistent typeface. For an article or blog post, tell users what's most important in headers, subheaders, and block quotes. This helps avoid the dizzying "wall of text" that is more likely to result in a high bounce rate.

Headings (H1)

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Subheading

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When designing your website, you'll want to create an all-encompassing visual language that includes text, images, and calls-to-action.[8] Visual hierarchy should direct patients toward the CTA, encouraging them to follow through on next steps. Here are a few things to consider when creating your visual hierarchy:

- The more important a piece of information is, the more visual "space" it should take up on the page. Fill that visual space with color, size, and placement.
- Use bold, contrasting colors to draw attention to key topics, but use color selectively – too much can overwhelm the user.
- Pull important information or statistics into separate "call-out" boxes.
- Calls-to-action should stand out from the rest of your page and have a clear, actionable message.

[4] https://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/15/health-online-2013/

[5] https://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/

[6] https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/7323900?hl=en

[7] https://developers.google.com/search/mobile-sites/mobile-first-indexing

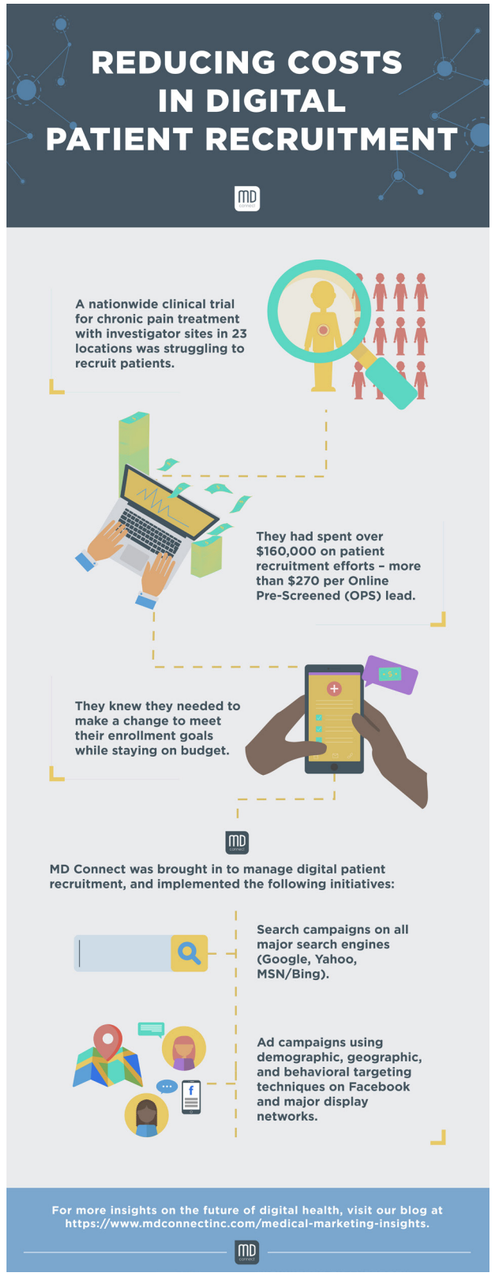
8 https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/

Image, Video, and Animation

Compelling visuals often mean some combination of image, video, and animation that enhances (but don't detract from) the user's experience. For images, try not to rely exclusively on stock photos – the healthcare industry is rife with stock imagery and websites that use it merely blend into their competition. Healthcare websites that overly rely on stock imagery can also, ironically, feel too clinical. Instead, look for opportunities to use your own professional photos or include custom image treatments or illustration. These may include infographics, which convey important information through engaging design and useful content.

Videos and animation can also make your site more dynamic. For instance, an interview with a prominent physician can help your practice or hospital look professional and trustworthy. When it comes to animation, it's important to take the overall experience into account. It's easy to go overboard with intrusive elements that detract from the website's focus. Instead, use animation sparingly to draw attention to important information.

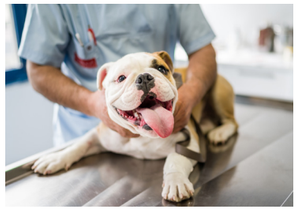
Lastly, a good image may be worth a thousand words, but a bad or nonsensical image merely causes confusion. Even if the image quality is high, ensure that the content of the image – and the message it conveys – makes sense with the rest of the content on the webpage.



Photos of puppies may be cute, but they're out of place on a blog post about a medical procedure. If you're commissioning custom graphics, work with your design team to plan each graphic so it amplifies the corresponding content.







Load Speed

A unique and innovative approach is key to effective web design, but sometimes a business's design goals can get in the way of the larger picture. According to Kissmetrics, people expect a webpage to load in two seconds or less, and 40% abandon a site that takes more than three seconds to load. A successful website should balance rich visuals with speedy load times.

> 40% abandon a site that takes more than three seconds to load.[9]

As compelling as they can be, rich media elements like ultra high resolution photos and videos can negatively affect load speed or browser compatibility. Your design and development team can help you decide where visual elements will have the biggest impact and which file formats will allow the website to maintain load speed.

Web Accessibility

For most of us, using the internet is second nature. But for the 57 million Americans with disabilities,[10] seemingly simple tasks like typing, clicking, or reading can present real challenges. Web accessibility means developing your site so that it can be easily used and understood by as many people as possible, including the 54% of Americans with disabilities who regularly use the internet.[11] This is especially relevant for healthcare providers, as visitors may have conditions that make websites difficult to navigate. Medical marketers and web designers should consider patients with a variety of disabilities and health conditions.

> 54% of Americans with disabilities who regularly use the internet.[11]

[9] https://neilpatel.com/blog/loading-time/

[10] https://www.interactiveaccessibility.com/accessibility-statistics

[11] http://www.practicalecommerce.com/articles/1417-Accessibility-How-Many-Disabled-Web-Users-Are-There-

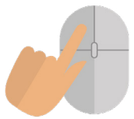
So what does accessible design look like? Like most good websites, it starts with the user experience. The most common categories of disabilities to consider are:

Vision:

People with limited or no vision have trouble navigating websites, as well as seeing images or other visual content.

Hearing:

Some people may be completely deaf or unable to hear well.



Motor skills:

Users may have trouble moving the mouse, typing, or otherwise interacting with the website.

Photosensitivity:

People with epilepsy or other photosensitive conditions may be triggered by flashing animation.

Cognitive disabilities:

Users with dyslexia or other cognitive issues could have trouble understanding parts of the text on your website.

The following best practices can improve the overall accessibility of your website:

- Make your website friendly to assistive technologies, including screen readers (which vocalize the text on a website), speech recognition software, or alternative keyboards. You can do this by adding alt text to your images, captioning any video content, and ensuring that all content can be accessed using the Tab key.
- Keep flashing animations to a minimum, and don't enable autoplay on sound or video.
- Choose your colors carefully so people with color blindness are able to read your text. This includes putting darker text on lighter backgrounds (or vice versa). Avoid backgrounds and text with similar shades or intensities of color.
- Enable resizeable text, and make sure your design works at most text sizes. You can test this by zooming into the text on your website – if this works well, you're likely in the clear.

Web accessibility also includes responsive design, which helps your site show up correctly on all kinds of devices from smartphones to desktop computers. This improves UX for patients with disabilities, but is also likely to make your website more enjoyable for all visitors. As user satisfaction increases, you're likely to improve your brand's reputation and organic search rankings.

HOW TO BUILD YOUR WEBSITE

Once you've gotten the basics down, it's time to actually build your website. How you go about this depends largely on your budget. Even if you're a smaller medical practice, you may be tempted to use one of the many free or low-cost plug-and-play platforms to build your site. We understand the temptation; these options allow you to create your own website using pre-built templates and drag-and-drop elements. Additionally, these platforms don't require extensive design or coding experience.

However, these platforms generally don't suit the needs of a modern medical practice. For starters, templates are often built with a personal or consumer focus, and medical practices will have a hard time finding something that feels simultaneously current and on-brand. Furthermore, most medical practices require custom functionalities like scheduling tools or patient portals – features that can't be found in, and are generally not supported by, major website platforms.

These limitations may explain why most medical practices or hospitals opt for custom-built websites that allow for rich visuals and add-ons like scheduling functionality. We recommend working with a trusted vendor that is experienced in medical web design. A vendor that caters to medical professionals or has at least some experience in the industry will be better equipped to help you achieve the customization you're looking for.

While building your initial website is perhaps the most important — and potentially the most challenging — step, the process does not end there. Websites require continual optimization in order to maintain SEO rankings and keep the content fresh. In the short term, this means posting regular blog articles or adding new graphics and videos. In the long term, it means re-evaluating and likely redesigning your website every two to four years.

Design best practices change frequently, as do Google's algorithms. That's why it's essential to make continuous adjustments to help patients find your website and ultimately convert. If your site is clunky or outdated, patients may question other aspects of your practice and perceive you as unprofessional. However, if your site is freshly updated and visually appealing, visitors are more likely to find your business trustworthy and book an appointment.

CONCLUSION

It takes about 50 milliseconds (or 0.05 seconds) for a visitor to form an opinion of your website. As users tend to "judge a book by its cover" when it comes to web design, it's essential to make a good impression the moment visitors arrive on your site. Patients know that they have options when it comes to healthcare, so if they don't like your website, they're likely to go to one of your competitors instead.

Creating a great medical website is a complex process, but with the right tools, you can build a site that is both engaging and easy-to-use. In particular, familiarizing yourself with some design best practices and investing in a qualified vendor can make all the difference. As new visitors and loyal patients alike have more and more positive experiences with your brand, you're likely to see a boost in web traffic and most importantly, conversions.

If you're interested in building a new website for your hospital or medical practice, but aren't sure how to get started, get in touch with MD Connect today. We'll work with you to build a beautiful, functional website that will not only increase your professional reputation, but also bring more patients in the door.

It takes about 50 milliseconds (or 0.05 seconds) for a visitor to form an opinion of your website.[12]

[12] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01449290500330448

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