Keeping Google in mind
Cathy Johnson looks at how to make your practice website really work

Hit the spot with your website requires thought and careful planning. The web is an interactive, dynamic and rapidly changing communications medium and a great website is one that gives the visitor exactly what they want. So what are your patients looking for? It may come as a shock to learn that it's not so much your treatments they're most interested in, it's the solution to their particular problem. You need to ask yourself what are their biggest problems and then solve them. In order to have a popular site, you've got to get inside the mind of the user. "How can I help my patients?" is the best place to start.

At the outset, be sure to employ an experienced web designer, preferably one with knowledge of dentistry, and discuss your main objectives in depth. It is also worth doing some research of your own and making a shortlist of sites you like, noting what appeals to you and why. What grabs your attention, what keeps you there, what looks good, what works well, what are you most impressed by? Also, look out for any really bad sites and make a list of potential pitfalls such as what makes it hard to navigate, what looks unprofessional or confusing, what takes too long to load and so on.

What brings you back to any of the websites you visit? Generally, you will come back for a few reasons: visual appeal, ease of use, clarity and usefulness of content and optimum functionality. You will be able to discuss your observations with your chosen designer and plan the navigation based on all the elements you decide to include.

Visually your site must look clean, inviting and easy to navigate. A clear layout, legible text and logical navigation will always have the edge over flashy gimmicks and information overload. Avoid flash animation as people are likely to go elsewhere rather than wait for anything that takes time to load. The "skip intro" button has to be the most clicked on option on the internet.

A survey by Akamai Technologies of 1,000 web users showed that if a shopping site took longer than four seconds to load, 75 per cent of the participants would not return. Around 50 per cent of respondents formed a 'negative perception' of a company with a badly performing website and a third would abandon a site if it was difficult to navigate. So it is wise to either eliminate animation altogether or opt for alternative compatible animation such as JavaScript.

Always keep Google in mind. Achieving high rankings on Google is an ever-changing minefield, so take expert advice on search engine optimisation and let function take priority over form where it is beneficial to do so. Unlike printed literature, there are limitations with regard to fonts when it comes to website design and functionality. Make sure you use a Google-friendly font so your site can be read on any system, including the iPad and iPhone.

It goes without saying that your practice logo must be prominent and the colour scheme consistent with your brand. This is a perfect opportunity to reinforce your brand image and continuity is key. Professional photographs of the dental team and the practice on the home page will add a personal touch and differentiate you from those that open with the same old stock images of smiling models. Keep the look fresh, simple and uncluttered and make sure your menu is concise. Don't fall into the trap of bombarding patients with anything that takes time to load or confusing, what looks unprofessional or time-consuming, what takes too long to load and so on.
so much information at the outset that they are put off and log off.

Make sure content is easy to find and in a variety of ways. A top navigation, side navigation, search and home button are great players in this field. No matter how good your website is, always assume there will be users who get lost along the way and cater for their needs. The bottom line is if a user can't find the information they are looking for, they have no reason to be on your site. A call to action 'contact' button must be accessible on every page – after all, the main purpose is that your viewers contact you.

Visitors don't want to have to think too hard when viewing your web pages, they want answers to the questions they are asking and to be fascinated by anything else they come across. Increasingly, web surfers show a maddening unwillingness to stay put on any one website, so make sure you stir their emotions to keep them hooked. People talk about this in terms of 'stickiness', meaning that your site must keep your viewer's attention glued rather than let them click on someone else's. Remember, your rival practice website is just one click away.

Hot buttons will grab viewers' attention on the home page. Not too many, perhaps three or four, which identify common problems and present a solution. An example problem might be 'Dental Implants - the solution to unse:ghty gaps'. Hot buttons are also a great way of capturing attention via incentives, discounts or instant access to details of payment plans. Just take care to limit the number of these buttons so as not to overwhelm the user.

The language you use should always be uncomplicated and patient centered. When explaining treatments remember that although patients are interested in the techniques, their primary concern focus is more likely the outcome for themselves.

Patients will also be looking for evidence of your reputation and checking out testimonials. Before and after photo galleries show the remarkable transformations that can be achieved, so make sure your photo galleries scroll to show how much experience you have. Include plenty of written, or preferably video, testimonials, but do remember to ask for patient consent.

All in all, make sure you take every step you can to ensure the user experience is a good one by giving them what they want as quickly as possible. The fundamental features that make a website work can be elusive, but the underlying trick is to know your target market and design your site to serve their needs. Well organised, edited, and timely original content set in an attractive, memorable, interactive, Google-friendly and consistent format are some key traits of great websites – and when you have a great website, marketing becomes a much easier walk in the park.