

A New Study Reveals How, Why and What Not to Do

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The trend is clear: People all over the world are accessing health information on the internet. According to a study released by The Pew Internet and American Life Project, 152 million American adults (55 percent of those with internet access) have sought health information on line. (The desire for chiropractic information is reflected in the tremendous growth of traffic on ChiroWeb at over 1.5 million page views per month and growing.)

Over 12,000 adults were surveyed for the study, which reveals how consumers search for health information, and what they do and don't want to see when they get to your website:

- Seeking Useful Information - 92 percent of those seeking health care information ("health seekers") found the information useful; 55 percent say the internet has improved the way they get health information.
- Information Influences their Decisions - 70 percent of the health seekers say that the information they found on line influenced their "decision about how to treat an illness or condition." Twenty-eight percent said the information affected their decision to see a doctor.
- Illness, Fitness and More - 91 percent of health seekers looked for information on physical illness; 13 percent for fitness and nutrition information; 11 percent for health news; and 9 percent for specific doctors, hospitals or medicines.
- Aren't "Giving Up Personal Information" - 79 percent have never provided their e-mail address to a health website; 83 percent have never provided their name or other personal information.
- Fear Privacy Violations - 89 percent are concerned that health website might sell or share information; 80 percent say it is important that they can get information anonymously.
- Demand Accountability - 81 percent of health seekers think they should be able to sue a site that sells or shares their information contrary to their privacy policy.

So how do these findings direct our efforts to educate the world about chiropractic and wellness?

I believe this study reveals the keys to the success or failure of your presence on the internet. Follow these key points and you will increase your practice and improve your relationship with your patients. Disregard them and you will drive away potential patients and alienate existing ones.

The Keys to Your Success on the Web:

1. Provide Useful, Reliable Information - The chiropractic and health information you provide patients and consumers on your website should not only be useful, but should include a list of sources that support the reliability of the information you provide. But general information

is only the first step. In addition, you should always provide a way for people to anonymously ask questions specific to their individual needs.

2. Respect the Power of Information - Reliable information provided to consumers at the time they are seeking appropriate health care can educate them to the point where they are ready to become patients. Be ready to share your knowledge with consumers seeking information on their conditions as requested.
3. Teach Wellness - Teach your patients and website visitors how to maintain wellness. This raises their respect for you and makes you more likely to be the one they call when they're in need.
4. Respect Privacy - There is no need to ask for personal information from patients or visitors on your website. They will provide it as needed. And whatever you do, don't ever sell or share patients' personal information (not even their name and e-mail address) with anyone else without their permission. Sharing could include entering their name, e-mail address and other personal information into programs developed and controlled by a third party. There have been far too many instances of start-up web companies selling their e-mail lists as part of the liquidation of the company. Always get the patient's permission. Without such permission, you may not get sued, but you could be the subject of an FTC investigation if a
5. Be Ready to Educate Your Community (and Beyond) - If you provide reliable information that people can use to maintain their health, expect to have a popular website. Assuming you have submitted your website address to lots of search engines, advertised it to your patients and allow your visitors to remain anonymous, people will visit in growing numbers.

As a point of example, ChiroWeb has been offering a free, bi-weekly e-mail patient-oriented newsletter (*To Your Health*) for the last seven months. Over 21,000 patients and consumers now subscribe, with almost 200 added every weekday. Some area codes in the U.S. are approaching 1,000 subscribers. This is beginning to make a real impact. And while most of these subscribers live in the U.S., the current list includes people from 66 countries, many of whom are just beginning to enjoy chiropractic care. (For more information on offering this program to educate consumers and patients, please call 1-800-359-2289.)

While it may seem like a daunting task, using the internet is the most effective, cost-efficient way to share chiropractic with the world and your community. You may not get a lot of new patients immediately, but you will plant seeds in the minds of patients and potential patients that will yield increasing results over time.

Your own website and patient e-mail newsletter need not be expensive. Most internet service providers offer space for a small website as part of your monthly fee. And it only takes a few hours each month to write your e-mail newsletter and send it to your patients. If time is too precious or you don't have the expertise, a full package of web services (that includes your own website and personalized patient e-mail newsletter) is available from a number of companies for less than \$125 per year.

Take the time to put your practice on line and reach and educate your community. Encourage other DCs to do the same. If we all make this a priority, we can make ignorance and misinformation about chiropractic a thing of the past.

1. The online health care revolution: How the web helps Americans take better care of themselves.
Pew Internet and American Life Project: Online Life Report. November 26, 2000.

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