

Netly News Update

Michael Devitt

In the January 12 issue of *DC*, we reported on a number of separate issues that pertained to the Internet. But the dynamics of the Internet are constantly in a state of flux. There is always some new product, contract, or agreement that has an effect on the Internet and the people who use it. Let's review a number of new developments on the Internet and see what impact they will have for its users.

More Expensive Websites Not Always Better

When it comes to designing a website, organizations may not necessarily get what they pay for. That seems to be the consensus of a number of Internet analysts who presented their findings at the recent Web Builder 98 conference in San Francisco.¹

In a small test conducted last year, researchers surveyed 10 websites, each consisting of at least 3,000 pages. Among the sites surveyed were those of Hewlett-Packard, News.com and Disney (which spent a reported \$300 million to develop and publish their site). Participants in the survey were asked to find specific information from each particular site in a sort of online scavenger hunt. The participants were monitored for three hours and their activities recorded.

Disney's site, by far the most expensive site published, was rated the worst of the 10. Meanwhile, a website for Edmund's Automobile Buyer's Guides (which cost only \$10,000 to publish) was rated the highest of the group.

The researchers noted a number of important findings in the study. A major complaint from most users was that some links in each website were not descriptive enough to provide the information they were looking for. For instance, clicking on the link for "101 Dalmatians" in the Disney site led to a number of confusing options, ranging from a description of the movie to a download of the film. Users were more satisfied with less ambiguous links, such as "Click here for car prices!" on the Edmund's site.

Another surprising finding in the study was that the less "readable" a page, the more useful and authoritative it is to a user. According to the researchers, readability is concerned with the structure of sentences, the length of words and other proper usage of English. But Web surfers skim a site's contents, making the idea of readability less important to those interested in gathering information.

The message to those who are interested in building or redesigning a website is clear. A million-dollar site will not always result in a million satisfied customers. Design a site that is simple, easy to navigate and information-specific. Ask questions and always be on the lookout for new ideas and designs. Use your employees or patients as test subjects and listen to what they have to say. It could make the difference between a site that people flock to for information, versus one avoided like the plague.

Internet Junkies?

Late last summer, a study was conducted by Kimberly Young of the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford.² Based on 360 Internet surveys of active online users, the study found that people dependent on online communications (chat rooms, surfing the Web, e-mail, etc.) who were deprived of that use suffered "withdrawal" anxiety.

Young's study found that middle-aged housewives were the most likely to have online "addictions," followed by the disabled, retired people, and students, all groups that generally have more leisure time than most people.

Most of these online addicts spend about 40 hours a week on the Web, with the primary areas of interest being chat rooms and games. E-mail and newsgroups were also popular, but the act of surfing the Web, particularly for anything educational, was one of the lowest areas measured.

Doug Fazel, deputy director of affairs for the American Psychological Association, noted that there is a growing interest in Internet addiction and that more information will be produced on the topic in the near future. Said Fazel, "With the growth of the Internet being exponential, this will be something looked at as time goes on to see what effect it's having on behavior."

Security, Privacy Top Net Fears: Pornography Bottoms Out

It used to be that the biggest worry for users on the Internet was the relative ease with which underage children could access pornographic material.

A survey earlier this year by the CyberDialogue³ firm asked 875 Internet users about a variety of online issues.

Eighty-six percent of the respondents were either "extremely concerned" or "very concerned" about the security of credit card numbers being transmitted via the Internet; three-quarters of those surveyed expressed worry about safeguarding their online privacy. Only 30 percent of the respondents voiced similar concerns about pornography on the Internet.

Among other important issues, 73 percent were concerned about the desire of special interest groups to control the type of information displayed on the Internet; 72 percent worry about government censorship; 47 percent are uneasy about websites and Internet content displayed by hate groups; 43 percent fear the possibility of government imposed ratings for websites; and 38 percent expressed concern about the depiction of violence on the Internet.

Results were also tabulated using age and the amount of time on the Internet. Respondents who had been on the Net for less than a year were much more likely to be concerned about privacy and security than those who had been on line for more than three years. The numbers also showed that the older online users were more concerned about violence and pornography on the Internet than their younger counterparts: 36 percent aged 30 or older were worried about pornography; and only 18 percent aged 18-29 showed the same concern.

Buy a New Set of Wheels on the Web

A recent survey by the National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA) finds that more than half of the nation's 19,000 franchised new car dealerships have a website on the Internet, and 40 percent of those that currently do not are planning to launch one within the next six months.

Reflecting a trend toward increasing convenience for customer service, a number of the sites offer various options for potential buyers. More than half of dealership websites allow visitors to view new and used-vehicle inventories, while nearly 26 percent allow customers to fill out electronic

finance applications on line. Nearly one-fourth (24 percent) of the sites allow users to schedule a service appointment for repairs or maintenance, and 22 percent will take sales orders for a new or used car over the Internet.⁴

You may be asking yourself, "What does a car dealership have to do with my practice?" Here is a statistic from the NADA survey that may interest you. Dealerships who have a presence on the Web have credited their sites with an average of five new vehicle sales per month, double the amount from a year ago.

How would you like to bring in five new patients a month because of your presence on the Internet? It may not sound like much in the beginning, but if you could average that number for a couple of years, it would equate to 120 new patients being added to your patient base as a direct result from having your own chiropractic website.

Creating and publishing a website is not as hard as you may think. With the right program, a good plan and some patience, you can design and post a quality website in a few hours. If you're unfamiliar with designing a site, contact your Internet service provider for information. There are also a number of other sources available to help you online , and the usual slew of publications one can find at the average bookstore.

As always, I welcome your comments. If you have any questions about the topics covered in this article, or if there's a website or Internet related subject you'd like to see reviewed, please contact me at the e-mail address or phone number below.

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Michael Devitt
Huntington Beach, California
Tel: (714) 960-6577
Fax: (714) 536-1482
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