

Are You Really Connecting with Patients?

Consider a practice Web site for strengthening current relationships and attracting new business.

WHEN Keith E. Watson, OD, ME, purchased a well-established practice in Connecticut, he knew he wanted to continue its longstanding tradition of providing quality family eye care. He also knew he wanted to place new emphasis on medical eye care. This approach hinged on adopting the most advanced diagnostic instrumentation available, and it needed to include a presence on the World Wide Web. "We're so technically oriented, it wouldn't make sense to not have a practice Web site," he said. "People would question that."

Not long after Eileen Lo, OD, opened her practice in California, she noticed that patients often asked if the practice had a Web site. She realized a presence on the Web would provide an efficient way to communicate with existing patients and make it easier for potential new patients to discover the practice. "We wanted to use a Web site as a way to educate people about eye problems and eye care and also as a way to promote the practice," she said.

Where to Begin?

When Drs. Lo and Watson began exploring ways to launch practice Web sites, they found quite a few options from which to choose. At one end of the spectrum, they could hire professional Web site developers, who might charge by the hour or sometimes more than \$10,000 for their initial design services. At the other end, for \$10 a month or less, they could use the build-it-yourself tools offered by Internet entities, such as

Yahoo or GoDaddy.com.

These options and others in between all raised questions. With the pros, would the practice be paying for "bells and whistles" it really didn't need? What would it cost to update the site? Is Web hosting included? With the build-it-yourself tools, are e-mail addresses included? Are there limits on disk space, number of Web site pages or data transfer? Is technical support available?

Ultimately, both practices determined that the best fit for them was Optometry.net, a service offered by the eyecare practice management and electronic medical records software company First Insight. According to Donna Lehmann, First Insight's Marketing Communications Manager, the company acquired Optometry.net in February 2000 from Vision Alliance Network Inc. to strengthen the online optometry community and help doctors reach new patients. Currently, 250 optometric practices have Web sites they created and manage using Optometry.net.

Optometry.net's \$499 annual fee includes site registration and setup, hosting services, e-mail accounts, toll-free telephone support and online technical support, Web site hit statistics and the ability to send bulk e-newsletters. (Visit optometry.net for a full list of what's included.) By purchasing add-ons, such as Websystem2 and 4PatientCare, practices can post Eyemaginations 3D-Eye Online animations and manage online appointment scheduling. An enhanced e-newsletter feature will be available this June. It will provide templates with graphics and photos for newsletters, past due notices, recalls and thank you

letters. A 90-day free trial of Optometry.net is available with no obligation to continue.

"Patients expect eyecare practitioners to use the Internet as a marketing tool," Ms. Lehmann said. "It's no longer considered leading edge, but more of a standard way to do business. A Web site is a great way to stay in constant contact with patients and build loyalty."

To create an Optometry.net Web site, you don't need any special software or HTML programming skills. Once you've chosen an overall look for the site from 41 available templates, you can add your own content. A point-and-click text editor is used to type in text, create tables and change colors and font sizes. You can upload files in most formats, including PDF, Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Flash, wav and ZIP. Users can add graphics and photos from an Image Library or insert their own pictures and videos. You can update your site any time by logging into the secure Web site Builder administration area.

Flexibility and a Personal Touch

Drs. Lo and Watson said they chose Optometry.net because it gave them the ability to create a professional-looking practice Web site they can update at will with minimal effort and expense. "I'm a do-it-yourself type of person," Dr. Watson said, "so when I wanted to launch my site, I tried the tools available from my Internet service provider. But the results didn't look professional or polished enough. With Optometry.net, I created a professional looking site with no learning curve. To a certain extent, you follow a format, but you can still customize it to make your site unique."

Visitors to Dr. Watson's ProEye Associates homepage (pro-eye.optometry.net) are greeted with a wealth of information. At a glance, they see the practice's phone number and the insurance plans it accepts. Visitors are alerted to the practice's expertise with the latest contact lens technologies and special offers available to University of Connecticut students. They can reorder contact lenses through the site and click on videos of Dr. Watson discussing dry eye, ocular allergy and other eye health topics. Visitors can link to the American Optometric Association's (AOA) explanation of what optometrists do as well as to

Dr. Watson's blog, which contains health news from a syndicated service. They also can use the homepage to comment on the site's latest design, check local weather and gas prices and link to the official sites of the towns where the practice has offices.

Through the various links, "We try to put everything that pa-

ProEye Associates - 45 Years!
 860-872-3348 (Vernon, CT) • 870-3643 (Watson)

Home About Us Our Staff Practice News Image Library Contact Us
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Vernon Office

Vernon Professional Park
 218 Talbotville Road, Suite 3
 Vernon, CT 06066

"Between Citco Gas
 & Adam Polish Foods"

(860) 872-3348 Telephone
 (860) 870-3643 Fax

Hours:

- Monday 8:30 - 5:00
- Tuesday 9:00 - 6:00
- Wednesday 8:30 - 3:00
- Thursday 10:00 - 7:00
- Friday 8:30 - 4:00
- Saturday Closed
- Sunday Closed

The optical is open for business during these hours. However, please call ahead to make sure there is an optician present to help you with your needs.

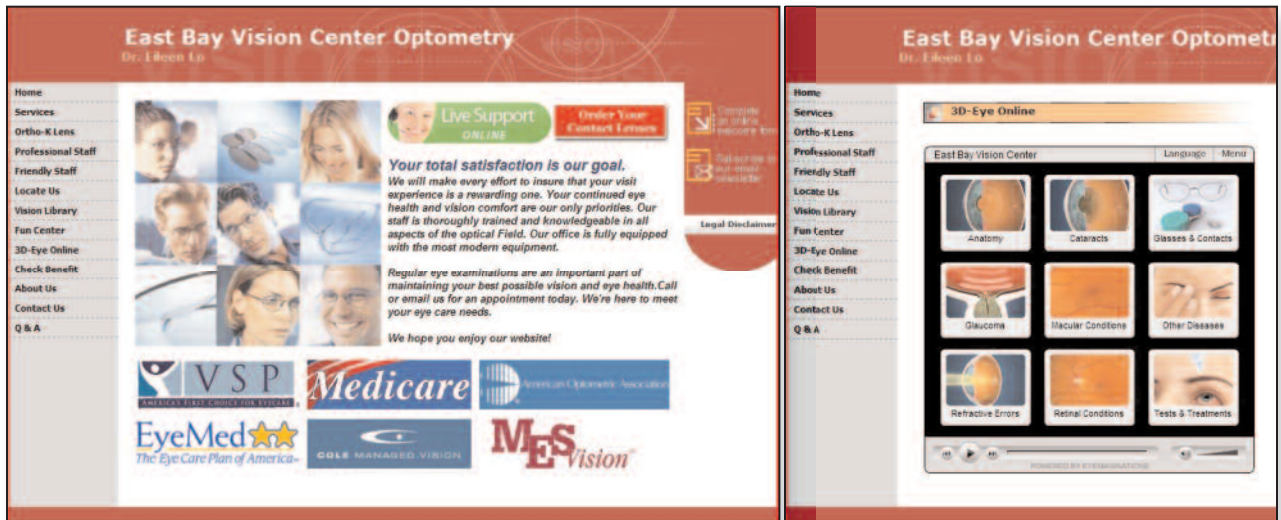
218 Talbotville Road, Vernon

Click here for interactive map

Pages on the ProEye Associates Web site (Keith E. Watson, OD, ME) provide patients with office hours and locations and include interactive maps.

tients would possibly want to know on the site," Dr. Watson said. Having the Web site has been especially helpful for explaining what patients can expect given the practice's commitment to a thorough, high-tech exam, he said. The "New Patients" section of the site includes information about the testing performed, such as the Optomap retinal exam, the time it takes and the associated fees. "We recently added a detailed list of our charges, which are among the highest in our area. Now patients can decide ahead of time if what we offer is of value to them, and there are no surprises for those who decide to choose us as their eyecare provider," Dr. Watson said.

The New Patients section also includes all of the paperwork patients need to complete, including the Welcome Form provided by Optometry.net for personal information and vision and health history. Because Dr. Watson also uses First Insight's MaximEyes practice management and EMR software, each time a patient completes a Welcome Form online, he can



Current and prospective patients of East Bay Vision Center Optometry (Eileen Lo, OD) can contact the practice using a Live Chat feature on the homepage and view 3-D videos about eye health.

import it directly into the patient record. Alternatively, patients can print the form and fill it out before their first visit. "Either way, it saves everyone time," he said.

Dr. Lo uses the Welcome Form, as well as several other features available for Optometry.net sites, on her homepage for East Bay Vision Center Optometry (ebvc.optometry.net). For example, visitors to the site can click on office hours and locations and maps for directions. They can order contact lens refills, send e-mail to the practice and read about and see pictures of the doctors and staff.

Optometry.net also provides a Vision Library that subscribing practices can post on their Web sites. The Library is a collection of educational articles organized under four main categories:

Your Eyes & Vision, Vision Problems, Eye Diseases and Contact Lenses. Dr. Lo refers patients who have Internet access to the Vision Library so they can review and read more about the topics discussed during their time in the office. "It helps make the exam more efficient," she said.

In addition, Dr. Lo has added several carefully chosen links to her site. For example, visitors can click on vision3D.com to learn about binocular vision in an entertaining way; the Vision Council's consumer information site, which highlights eye health, spectacle lenses and eyewear trends; and a detailed Web page about orthokeratology.

The practice also has posted a list of Fun Facts about Eyes, e.g., "In the first sketches of Scooby-Doo, Velma did not wear eyeglasses."

One of the most recent additions to the site is a Live Chat button (powered by software from Kayako). Staff members monitor the Live Chat feature during office hours to instantly answer questions from current and prospective patients. When the office is closed, patients can leave messages and receive a reply when the office opens. "It's not difficult to integrate extra features like this into our Optometry.net site," Dr. Lo said. "Overall, managing the site is very easy. Even a person without much computer experience can do it. Our staff

members handle the updates. It's important to us that the site looks professional. We get lots of compli-

ments from colleagues about that."

Dr. Lo also believes having the Web site helps to attract new patients. According to Optometry.net Web site hit statistics, 1,500 to 2,000 people view the site each month.

You Have to be Out There

Dr. Watson said he would advise everyone starting out in practice to create a Web site, no matter how they choose to go about it. "Use it to help get your name out there," he said. "If you're going to show you're with it, you have to get your name out there." **nOD**