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## Tips for Creating a Better Hospital Website

Westchester Medical Center's award-winning website is becoming the nexus of the hospital's communications. The secret of its success? An integrated approach that combines the strategic vision of marketing with the content development skills of public relations and the technical expertise of IT.

The process of creating a truly interactive platform that engages a hospital's diverse audiences is loaded with opportunity, but it can also be frustrating. Complicating the challenge is the wide disparity among a hospital's target audiences—past, current, and potential patients, health professionals, hospital employees, the media, taxpayers, regulators, local government officials, and the communities within the institution's service area.

Westchester Medical Center (WMC) in Valhalla, New York, is a Level 1 Trauma Center and the primary tertiary care facility for more than 3.5 million people in the seven-county Hudson Valley region, northern New Jersey, and lower Connecticut. Until 2005, our website functioned primarily as an electronic brochure. It was an isolated collection of information that had not been integrated into our brand platform and had no connection with our traditional marketing vehicles. As healthcare consumers became more savvy, it became clear that we needed to spearhead a centralized and consistent interactive site that would allow us to showcase programs and specialties while creating opportunities to engage with patients and other stakeholders.

For more than three years, Harrison Leifer DiMarco, a full-service marketing and public relations agency, has partnered with WMC's Marketing Department to create an award-winning website ([www.worldclassmedicine.com](http://www.worldclassmedicine.com)) that is becoming the nexus of all of the hospital's communications. The remainder of this article discusses some of the challenges we faced and the solutions we devised.

### Decide Who Does What

In the early days of the Internet, websites were usually created and managed by information technology (IT) departments. Today, content management systems allow marketing departments greater control over their sites; it's no longer necessary to wait for IT to tweak copy or add a new page. At WMC, we view the website as a communications vehicle for the hospital's marketing team. The IT team supplies us with the latest technological options and production support, just as our printers and video vendors support those tactics.

We have found success with an integrated approach that combines (1) the strategic vision of marketing, (2) the content development skills and organizational insight of public relations, and (3) the technical expertise of IT. Strong strategic marketing principles ensure that the website as a whole, as well as each specific element of the site, supports the brand identity and key messaging of the medical center. Public relations drives content development by working one on one with program and specialty leaders to determine goals and map out a plan. Marketing then uses this information to prepare unique content in a brand-consistent manner. Finally, support from a highly skilled IT team is critical in allowing us to get the look and functionality we want. Moreover, IT experts are often the source of suggestions about continuous upgrades of the site,

including new functionality, search engine optimization, and social media options.

### Balance Departmental and Institutional Identity

Most hospitals find it difficult to pull together the massive amount of disjointed information at their disposal and still communicate their brands effectively online.

WMC has six centers of excellence and hundreds of subspecialties to highlight. One of our early challenges was to find a way to differentiate each center of excellence without diluting our brand image. Although we kept the basic navigation and page setup the same throughout the website, each center was given a unique color scheme and appropriate imagery. We also provided individualized treatment of each center's content, based on input from staff members involved. In the near future we will begin to better distinguish between the centers by focusing on center-specific news headlines and e-newsletters on each center's main or home page.

To keep our content accurate and timely, we facilitate ongoing meetings with clinical and administrative staff members from departments across the medical center and help them review what needs to be updated, changed, or deleted. We also keep them informed about industry standards and encourage ongoing review of their own and other sites so we always know where we stand in the marketplace and among our peers.

### Aim for Engaging and Interactive

A website should not be static; it should provide plenty of opportunities for interaction with your audience. For example, if WMC is hosting an educational seminar about bariatric surgery, we don't simply post a flyer on our website. We send out invitations to our e-mail list, encourage consumers via radio and print advertising to RSVP online, send them e-mail confirmations with parking instructions, offer quick links to the areas of the site where our bariatric surgery qualifications are showcased, and encourage the presenter to post the key lessons after the event for those who could not attend. Coming soon, we will offer webcasts of seminars after each event.

Another way we engage visitors at our site, particularly patients and their loved ones, is by offering the CarePages service. CarePages allows patients and their loved ones to build a free, personal website to connect family and friends during an illness or long period of hospitalization.

It's important that the information posted on the website be current. Just as we issue seasonal press releases and write trend-based articles for publication, we showcase timely information for our web visitors on the home page. Our content management system helps us keep on top of community events, professional development opportunities, and fundraisers so that this information is never outdated.



### Don't Hide Your Light

Because one of our goals is to become a resource for health information for our community, we want to be sure that people who are searching online can find us. Search engines like Google, Yahoo, and AOL send out crawlers to seek out sites that will be most relevant to their searching visitors. We designed a search engine optimization (SEO) program to better position our site with the search engines through content creation, careful coding of web pages, and link popularity campaigns. A caveat: It is crucial to work with a reputable SEO vendor, because if the SEO work is not done properly, the search engines can blacklist your site indefinitely.

SEO requires a long-term commitment, but it has already started paying off for WMC. Over the first six months of our program, we saw a 19 percent increase in overall unique traffic, while page views increased by 14 percent and organic search-driven traffic (the results that occur naturally on the left-hand side of the search engine page) increased by 25 percent. During that time, the average number of unique visits per month jumped from 21,000 to 25,000. We also received 130,000 page views per month (up from 114,000) and saw the average length of a visit to the site increase to 3 minutes.

### Websites Are Never Finished

Our website continues to grow and evolve as our many services and programs at WMC strive to showcase their expertise and achievements online and as user participation in online subscription vehicles, event registrations, and fundraising campaigns climbs. We continue to set short-term and long-term goals, including incorporating social media tactics such as

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podcasts, RSS feeds, and a YouTube channel.

For Westchester Medical Center, reconceiving our website as the hub of our "customer" relationship network started paying dividends from the outset, and the return on investment continues to accumulate. In 2007, the site won a best-in-category (silver) award for Best Site Design for hospitals over 400 beds in the eHealthcare Leadership Awards competition. Earlier this year, the site took another best-in-category (second place) for Best Web Solution for Healthcare Content and Community in the Consumer Health World Awards.

For us, however, the best measure of success is not the design awards or even the traffic metrics, but in knowing where we started and where we are now—and realizing how many consumers, patients, and families we have helped along the way. ☺

## Six Ways to Engage Web Visitors

Try these ideas from WMC's website for engaging a web audience:

- Allow friends and families to send get-well cards to patients from the site.
- Offer website visitors a subscription to a regular e-mail health tip that includes a "send to a friend" option and an opt-in subscription.
- Post fundraising information and volunteer opportunities online for potential donors and volunteers. For example, WMC takes orders for its popular children's hospital holiday cards on the website.
- Let community residents who are interested in volunteering apply online.
- Make it possible for Human Resources to manage recruitment efforts and staff records within the framework of the site. Let prospective employees view open job postings and establish an application file.
- Direct readers to the site for more information in traditional marketing materials such as ads and magazine articles. Create specific landing pages to evaluate the success of these programs in driving Web traffic.