Editorial

Internet Medical Marketing: “Anything Goes”? 

Those of us who watched the practice of aesthetic surgery develop from the early 1960s to 2006 can easily recall that marketing of any sort was taboo for many years. However, with the increase of aesthetic surgery patients and the corresponding increase of plastic surgeons there grew a need for some mechanism to match patients with appropriate physicians. The marketing of medical skills developed slowly, except for a few renegades who marketed aggressively early on. Today, most plastic surgeons would agree that it is reasonable and ethical to tell the public who you are, what you do, and to provide details about your personal qualifications and the surgical procedures you perform. However, the freedom of Internet marketing should not provide license. In many ways, the Internet has become a communication tool in which “anything goes.” In spite of this, it is the job of plastic surgery and other medical websites to be vigilant about getting the facts to the public in the context of the highest ethical standards.

For our purposes, a definition of ethical may be that which is considered so by the average and prudent observer, including physicians and patients. When you grapple with your personal approach to Internet marketing, I suggest that if it is acceptable to you, your office staff, your spouse, and your plastic surgery colleague, it is probably okay. If there is a consensus that the Internet information or website is technically sound, aesthetically appealing, and ethically presented, you probably have a good website. Of course, everyone has a unique style, with some preferring a lot of pizzazz and wild graphics and others, a more conservative approach.

Medicolegal Considerations

There are also medical and legal issues that should be considered when establishing a website. An Internet website can be used to present your public image to a large number of people, and it can be used to stimulate communication with potential patients. Because of regulations governing communication between you and your patients, patient rights to privacy, and the type of representations made on your website, consultation with an attorney may be helpful. Additional guidance is available from your professional society.

Patient Photos: A Shadowy Area

If a patient appears on a website with eyes or mouth partially blacked out, then it is not unreasonable to assume that this patient may not have provided permission for publication, which constitutes unethical publication of results. The bottom line is that it is vital to respect patient privacy, even if you do not think that your patients will see their photos on the Internet. Another problem related to ethics and patient photos is the presentation of preoperative and postoperative photographs that either exaggerate the results of surgery or, even worse, alter them. For example, differences in lighting and facial angles may cause a postoperative result to appear better than it is. Other distorting factors may include makeup, facial expression, and differences in preoperative and postoperative distance from the viewer.

Virtual Consultation

Doctor-to-patient communication via the Internet can present some problems. If you invite contact from potential patients on your website, you probably should take the time to answer their queries. I have many patients who started out inquiring about surgery through my website, sending photographs, and then having a telephone consultation. However, I always arrange a person-to-person consultation before committing to surgery. Some physicians enjoy responding to patient e-mails, but others may simply be too busy, especially if there are a large number of consultations coming in to the website. It is a good idea to decide in advance how you will handle e-mails, personally or through your staff, if and when they appear.
Internet Opportunities

The Internet has opened new possibilities for communicating with potential patients and placing ourselves in the public eye. Presenting good scientific material on your website can counter some of the misinformation that patients may be exposed to on other sites. According to some, the highest number of website “hits” result from perusal of the “photo album” and the “question and answer” sections. Patients are becoming more sophisticated in their level of understanding of plastic surgery and frequently visit several websites and have several consultations before actually undergoing a surgical procedure. It is therefore reasonable and prudent to introduce your own writing from articles or textbook chapters to substantiate your website opinion or presentation. Obviously, permission from the publisher should be obtained first.

It is also interesting that a chat room on your website or on one of the many discussion sites focusing on specific plastic surgery procedures can market for you. If you “Google” your name, you may be surprised at how many times it comes up because of your publications, chat room discussions about you, or comments made on websites by former patients. Hopefully, the comments are positive and help to send more patients your way, whether or not you feel it would be advisable to include these chat rooms as part of your website. I believe it is ethical to do so, giving voice to a wide range of patients, both satisfied and not.

The role of an aesthetic plastic surgery website will vary from practice to practice, and you should carefully consider your goals and make sure the content and format of your website is consistent with them. It is probably wise to hire a website developer and professional graphic designer and writer, and then submit your website to attorney scrutiny to make sure that there is nothing you overlooked in meeting the highest ethical standards. When it comes to plastic surgery websites, which play such an important role in forming patients’ attitudes and beliefs about aesthetic surgery and what it can do for them, it should never be the case that “anything goes.”

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