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## ASK THE EXPERT ... JIM EDWARDS

### Question: How Can a Healthcare Organization Get the Most Out of Its Online Physician Directory?

The searchable list of doctors introduced more than a decade ago has evolved into one of the most visited areas, and potentially the most significant component, of a healthcare organization's Web site. Yet the online physician directory, generally found through a *Find a Physician* link, often is not designed well for the site visitor, nor is it delivering full value to the organization.

Driving a substantial number of visitors to your physician directory and converting that traffic into patients can have a significant impact on your organization's bottom line. Making full use of the directory within the organization can also pay major dividends in other ways. To maximize your investment and opportunities for success, the following best practices should be considered:

#### 1. Clearly define the target audience

Various audiences require considerably different levels of information and methods of presentation. Visitors to a community hospital and general acute care medical center Web site seek certain information on

primary care physicians as well as specialists. Consumers going to the Web site of a specialty facility, such as a cancer hospital, look for a much higher degree of information.

Other audiences that directories can target include referring physicians, community physicians, researchers, hospital staff physicians, ancillary personnel, and third-party payers. Recognizing the expectations and needs of each of these audiences is key to providing just the right data.

#### 2. Understand corporate restrictions and preferences

Who can be included in the directory is of critical importance, and this decision is often based on the business rules of the organization and the goals of the group responsible for the management and maintenance of the directory. If the call center is responsible for maintaining the directory, institution rules may limit which physicians are displayed. If physician services or marketing is responsible, it may be possible to include and promote all credentialed physicians and even non-physician caregivers.

#### 3. Optimize search usability

An essential element in achieving the most from an online directory is superior usability. Studies strongly suggest that excellent usability is best realized by keeping things simple. Limit the primary search options to last name and specialty, and be explicit. Avoid consumer confusion. Rather than *Last Name*, title the search field *Physician's Last Name*. Generally avoid detailed physician subspecialties – 20 different categories of neurologists, for example – unless your target audience will be seeking and understand this level of detail.

Neal Linkon, senior vice president of Greystone.Net, a national consulting firm specializing in healthcare Web solutions, makes a strong case for restricting initial options. "Very complex searches allow for failed results," says Linkon, who conducts usability studies of online physician directories. "Robust primary search options are ineffective."

The ideal solution is an expanded search option for a more refined investigation, with this feature

readily apparent. This feature should allow users to select from such parameters as physician gender, languages spoken, desired city or miles from a certain ZIP code, whether new patients are being accepted, and insurance plans accepted. It might also include the doctor's medical center affiliation, office hours (weekdays, evenings, Saturday, Sunday), age range, and special interests.

Current search technology enhances usability. The auto-fill feature, where words are presented as letters are typed, expedites the search process and should be applied at the very least to searches for name, specialty, and special interests.

#### **4. Develop a well-designed, detailed physician profile**

The physician profile is the make-or-break area of a physician directory. This profile should not present a physician's curriculum vitae, but should instead be a strong marketing piece for the physician *and* the organization.

The profile should include full contact information such as address, phone number, and ideally an e-mail address; office hours; physician's educational and professional credentials; special clinical specialties; hospital, medical group, and academic affiliations; and a link to the doctor's Web site, if one exists. The year the doctor graduated from medical school can be useful for those seeking a physician of a certain age. A photo of the physician has become increasingly common and valued by consumers and other audiences. Another popular but rarely found feature is a statement of special personal interest and philosophy of care.

The profile is most effective when all this material is well organized and presented in an engaging manner. The solution to this issue for Main

Line Health, a health system that serves suburban Philadelphia, was to develop a tabbing format, says Mark Mistysyn, director of the organization's Web Center. The physician profiles on [www.mainlinehealth.org](http://www.mainlinehealth.org) have three tabs – General, which includes such data as education, credentials, and affiliations; Practice, which covers office information; and Publications & Citations.

The physician profile page is also the place where the hospital adds extra value to the process and ensures that its services are highlighted. To the side or below the profile should be links to related health information, video and audio clips, other physicians, special events, health assessments, classes, and even clinical trials. And of course, users should be able to find a link to request an appointment.

If the Web visitor doesn't find that the physician selected is quite right, it should be easy to search for another physician. At Main Line Health, a bar above a physician profile allows someone to go back to a previous search or to the list of search results, or else link to a completely new search.

#### **5. Include interactive features**

The most popular high-value feature is the *Request an Appointment* form, an extremely effective means of turning Web visitors into patients. It should be easily accessible throughout the Web site and especially from all pages of the directory. Northwestern Memorial Hospital ([www.nmh.org](http://www.nmh.org)) in Chicago has consistently recorded some 500 requests per month with an average of 76 percent of them becoming new patients. The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston ([www.utmb.edu](http://www.utmb.edu)) determined that more than 60 percent of its online appointment requests were from its own employees, who were taking

advantage of the services of their institution.

The addition of a video biography to the doctor's profile page brings a notable increase in the number of views and appointments, as well as a significant level of recognition for the physician. Videos feature the physician discussing his or her practice, background, and philosophy, and are archived in a central library.

Another advanced feature allows users of PDA devices and smart phones to search and display the online physician data. A more focused application downloads the entire directory to a mobile device and is particularly valuable for medical professionals who need quick access to the directory data without connecting via the Web site.

At Children's Hospital Boston ([www.childrenshospital.org](http://www.childrenshospital.org)), mobile capabilities are extremely helpful to referring physicians. "We cater to kids with complex conditions that require care by different specialists across the board and physicians from various programs," says Alison Dargie, marketing manager. "Having the information right there as a mobile resource is a great extension of the online directory."

#### **6. Market the physicians**

An additional means of getting the most from an online directory is strategically marketing the organization's physicians through site integration and promotion.

There are many avenues to successfully integrate the directory with the organization's Web site, but the most useful and effective approach provides two-way linkage throughout the site. A view of a physician's biography might also show listings that relate to the doctor's specialty and services, as well as other pertinent information, such as videos,

events, and health information. A Web page on a specific condition would show a similar listing of relevant information, including a link back to the related physician.

Tactics for highlighting physicians range from identifying new doctors in the directory and on other Web pages, to posting promotional materials such as interviews, television spots, research papers, and publications and archiving them in the physician's biography.

Groups of physicians are frequently portrayed as members of the team that supports a specific service line or center of excellence. The University of Mississippi Health Care (UMHC) gives a clever twist to this approach by presenting photos of the entire clinical team. (To see an example, visit [www.umhc.com/oth/Page.asp?PageID=OTH000169](http://www.umhc.com/oth/Page.asp?PageID=OTH000169).)

"Visitors to our *Find the Doctor* [page] are consistently seeking services within specific specialties – for instance, orthopedic surgeons who focus on knee replacements," says Hartman Holliman, IT project manager at UMHC. "We address this [need] with health services pages that provide clinical program descriptions and feature every physician affiliated with the particular service."

## **7. Make full use of existing resources to maintain the directory**

Data for an Internet-based physician directory is best obtained from existing resources. Building on a legacy system improves productivity, especially if an update process is in place and functioning well. The most obvious examples are call center data systems, both internal and external, and credentialing data systems.

Typically, a hospital managing its call center using internally hosted soft-

ware exports data directly to the on-line directory system, where this information is merged with marketing data from other sources. This strategy allows personnel to integrate the directory with the Web site, to add customized data not routinely archived in the call center, and to populate service-line sites with specific physician data.

A healthcare organization using an external call center for traditional physician referral services, including appointment request fulfillment, should import data periodically to the online directory. This process ensures that the physician information is integrated with all relevant pages and takes advantage of the call center's update procedures. In addition, the appointment form should be interfaced with the third-party service, resulting in an efficient single method for handling all appointment requests.

For institutions like Denver-based HealthONE ([www.healthonecares.com](http://www.healthonecares.com)), which includes seven hospitals and numerous outpatient centers, combining the online directories of many entities into one master database requires integrating information from various credentialing systems. According to Leslie Horna, public relations and community relations strategist, this process benefits from having existing information systems while creating an easy-to-manage update procedure supported by personnel at each of HealthONE's facilities.

## **8. Distribute information**

Distributing information from a well-managed data source provides yet another way for a hospital to reap benefits from its online physician directory. One application is a *Print on Demand* feature that serves as an up-to-date substitute or supplement for a traditional print directory.

While the print directory of Children's Hospital Boston is updated annually, its *Print on Demand* Internet option is updated nightly. The online version, which retains the hospital's brand by duplicating the graphics and layout of the print version, is used extensively by consumers and staff for reference and referrals.

Healthcare organizations of any size or location benefit from the ability to produce a hard copy of any entry or portion of the online directory. Physician liaisons and others engaged in marketing activities use the *Print on Demand* feature to emphasize specific doctors, services, and departments, while hospital personnel serving rural areas travel with current information in hand. **eH**

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