

Issue: August 2010  
practice website

## How To Design Your Website

**There's no limit to what you can spend on a practice website. So where do you start?**

Jim Thomas, *Editorial Director*

Search the Internet for optometric practices, and you'll find a variety of practice websites — some very basic and other advanced sites that include virtual office tours, real-time appointment scheduling, social networking and e-commerce.

Navigating through this sea of features, you may well ask yourself: "Which e-bells and e-whistles are essential for my practice's website?"

There's no single answer, say the optometrists interviewed for this article. All practitioners must do the research to select the right features and functionality for their practice's unique needs, while carefully considering the dollars they invest.

"A typical website will cost between \$1,000 and \$10,000, depending on what you want to do," says Michael Lange, O.D., Lange Eye Care & Associates, a multi-office practice based in Ocala, Fla. "You can have your website hosted for very little, or you can pay a webmaster or web company thousands of dollars a month to market your brand on the Internet. Just like advertising, there's no limit to how much you can spend."

### Set your targets

To determine the correct approach, many practitioners start by identifying their main "e-goals." As with other forms of marketing, the most common "e-goal" is to bring patients into the practice.

"A website needs to be a silent salesman," says Sheldon Kreda, O.D., Kreda Eye Care and Laser Center, Lauderhill, Fla. "The goal is to have any patient who views our site schedule an appointment."

This goal is critical because "print is no longer the first contact that many people have with a practice," says Walt Mayo, O.D., the CEO of DoctorSights, a web development company dedicated to helping O.D.'s create and optimize their web presence.

In its role as sales representative, the website must have a high-quality presence "that looks terrific at first impression," says Dr. Mayo.

Beyond the first impression, Neil Gailmard, O.D. says he seeks to build the image of Gailmard Eye Center, of Munster, Ind., as "high-tech and cutting edge." In addition, he says he's set the goal of having the site work as a "word-of-mouth referral tool that aids patients who want to tell others about the practice."



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Dr. Kreda says he planned to have patients utilize his practice website to obtain forms, receive information and simplify the process of obtaining services and products.

E-commerce plays a growing role, as practice websites offer a variety of products to compete for those customers who shop online.

Another emerging trend is social media. (*OM* will cover social media next month.) "All practices today need to embrace Twitter, Facebook, FriendFeed, and other major social networks," says Dr. Mayo.



The design of the Eye Consultants of Colorado website matches the color, imagery and feel of the brand the practice is trying to create.

Whatever the "e-goals," keep in mind that the website "needs to be an extension of your office," says Scot Morris, O.D., Eye Consultants of Colorado.

"Your site needs to match the color, imagery and feel of the brand that your practice is trying to create," he says.

### The basics of content

After establishing "e-goals" for your practice website, you must develop content and features that support these goals. Many O.D.s find the process of developing content (i.e. taking photos, writing and editing text, selecting and testing features, etc.) one of the most time-consuming tasks in website design.

Make sure all content confirms the patient's decision that "this is the practice I want taking care of my eyes and eye-related product needs," says Dr. Mayo.

Such content provides a clear description of the practice and may include:

- ▶ services provided
- ▶ practice hours
- ▶ location(s)
- ▶ insurance plans accepted
- ▶ office facilities
- ▶ contact information
- ▶ high-tech equipment
- ▶ the doctor and staff

- ▶ eye conditions and diseases
- ▶ spectacle and contact lens options
- ▶ commonly asked questions

Practitioners will also add photos, discount coupons and "virtual tours" to keep patients engaged on the site.

With the right content, a news feed or "What's New" page may also prompt visitors to return to your site. If you plan to update the site often, you must have the ability to make simple changes without having to go through the developer or hosting company, says Dr. Gailmard.

"A simple, administrative website will allow the owner to make changes to the text and photos without having to be familiar with HTML code," says Dr. Gailmard. "There should be no additional cost for these changes."

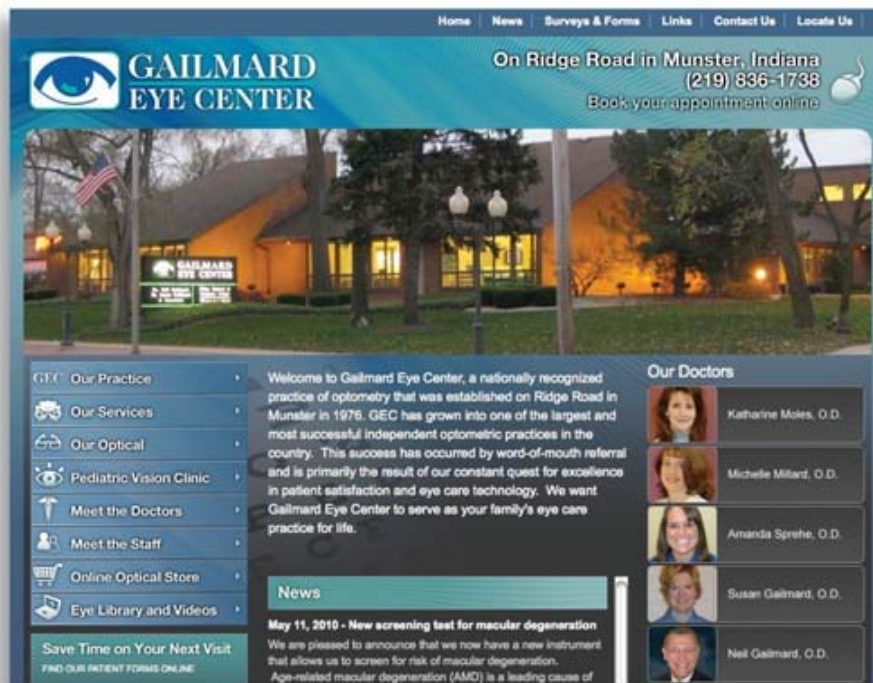
Articles on eye health, disease and nutrition may also attract patients and improve office productivity, as patients can read this content on their own time.

What content do patients visit most often? In tracking page views, Dr. Morris finds that after the home page, consumers next visit the page that identifies which health insurance the practice accepts. Visitors may then visit one of several locations — common Q&A, educational articles and the "about us" pages. Dr. Morris notes that the "about us" page is not near the top of the list of most viewed pages.

"I think patients don't really care about us, until other questions are answered," he says. "Do we accept their insurance? What are our hours? What is the general overall impression our website presented? Then they may care about us."

### Become interactive

Several years ago, most practice websites didn't include content that would allow visitors to interact with the practice. Today, in a world of "Web 2.0," a term that's associated with web applications that facilitate interactivity and user-centered design, information and services flow between patient and practice. An obvious example is online appointment scheduling.



**The Gailmard Eye Center website design reflects the practice's "high-tech and cutting-edge" image, says Dr. Gailmard.**

"I was surprised and pleased with how popular online appointment scheduling is," says Dr. Gailmard. "I think it's similar to how I would rather schedule my own airline flight online, rather than work through an agent."

Dr. Gailmard cautions against eyecare professionals (ECPs) confusing true real-time appointment scheduling with "a web page that simply allows a patient to request a preferred time by e-mail," which requires a response by the office staff.

He notes that when many ECPs consider real-time scheduling, they "erroneously assume that problems will occur, or the public will see that they are not very busy if many appointment times are available," says Dr. Gailmard.

Such a fear is unfounded because "the ECP has full control over what appointments are offered on the website," says Dr. Gailmard.

Yet, online scheduling may not work for all practices.

"In our practice, we like to take care of the patient personally," says Dr. Lange, noting that a phone call can make the appointment run smoother, as the staff better understands the patient's needs and becomes aware of details, such as insurance coverage.

Dr. Morris notes that his practice experienced "mixed success" with integrating e-scheduling into a paperless office.

"Even the best EHR [electronic health records] programs struggle to handle the complexities of scheduling," he says.

The same integration challenge occurs with other e-forms, says Dr. Morris. "I think we'll see progress when patients can input their information directly into a personalized and secure patient profile that downloads automatically into the their patient record in the EHR system," he says.

Aside from system integration issues, ECPs have found benefits in web-based office forms — even those that patients print. Dr. Kreda's office directs all new patients to online forms, which streamline the check-in process and "increase the likelihood that the patients will keep their appointments."

Interactivity can reach far beyond patient forms. For example, the Lange Eye Care website includes a live video stream of "Ask the Dr.," a radio program that Dr. Lange hosts. (See "On Air and Online.")

#### **On Air and Online**

In developing your website, consider connecting with other media utilized by your practice. Langeeyecare.com features a live video stream of "Ask the Dr.," a radio program hosted by Dr. Michael P. Lange since 1993. Broadcasted live Monday through Saturday on multiple radio networks throughout the South — and live video streaming over the internet — the program answers listener questions on eye health, disease and nutrition. (Dr. Lange, also a certified nutritional specialist, discloses that the program's content should not be construed "as medical advice of any sort.") The website contains an archive section where visitors can listen to past shows, as well as a form that allows site visitors to e-mail their own questions to Dr. Lange.

"The radio show promotes the website, and then the website promotes the radio show," says Dr. Lange. "This has been a huge practice builder — people who listen to the radio show will go to the website and ultimately, become patients."

### **E-commerce: How far should you go?**

For optometrists who plan their websites, perhaps no issue sparks more debate than e-commerce.

"I question the good sense behind sending our patients to the web to order contact lenses, even if it is through our site," says Dr. Kreda. "It sends the wrong message and encourages surf shopping where doctors will unlikely come out ahead."

Others suggest a more cautious approach.

"Contact lens purchasing is clearly the most important offering," says Dr. Mayo. "With its increasing popularity, the issue of online eyeglass sales needs to be addressed, at least conceptually, to make sure the damage done by outside online vendors is limited."

Still, others see e-stores as a solution for patients who prefer shopping at home or wish to buy products outside of normal office hours, says Dr. Lange. "So we offer everything from contact lenses to sunglasses to vitamins and [artificial] tears," he says. "It helps our bottom line and our patients."

Gailmard Eye Center offers three product lines on its website: contact lenses, nutritional supplements and eyeglasses.

Dr. Gailmard says he expects the online eyeglass category to grow but for now, this section of the website provides the practice with experience in this category.

"The eyeglass section has a virtual inventory of thousands of frames and all types of ophthalmic lenses," he says. "It provides a fun resource for patients because they can upload their own photos and do a virtual 'try-on' of thousands of frames. It's a good talking point for visitors."

Dr. Gailmard has found that while the contact lens-ordering portal of his website competes "very nicely" with other online sources, it's not utilized much, as most of his patients purchase a year's supply of lenses at the time of their annual exams.

"If the patient doesn't purchase a full-year's supply, the manufacturer does not offer free direct shipping, so again, patients order through the office and pick up the lenses in person," he says.

### **Don't create a "site unseen"**

If web users can't find your practice website by searching Google or Yahoo, all your cutting-edge e-features won't help your practice. Consider search engine rankings as one of the most important criteria when measuring the return on your website investment, says Dr. Gailmard.

"If you enter simple key words, such as 'optometrist' and your city and state, your website address should appear on the first page of search results," he says. "If you enter your name or the practice's name and the city and state, you should see an even higher placement."

Practices can boost visibility either "organically" by adding relevant content and keywords to the site (a practice known as search engine optimization) or through paid listings, which charge a per-click rate.

Dr. Lange sees search engine visibility as one of his practice's top challenges.

"When someone searches for an eyecare provider in the area of one of our offices, we want to come up number one in the search without being charged a pay-per-click rate by Google Ad-Words," says Dr. Lange. "It's a daily task for our webmaster to keep our site at the top of the search engine listings, as there are literally thousands of combinations of key words that are related to optometry."

To optimize rankings, use data reports that show what search engines are used most often to find your site, as well as the key words and which pages are viewed the most, says Dr. Lange. If your site features e-commerce, look at the keywords used to produce sales. To maximize your investment in keywords, "get rid of those that aren't producing sales or page hits," he advises.

Your efforts for high rankings shouldn't stop with search engines, adds Dr. Mayo. "Your concept of having a web presence needs to be all inclusive of the online resources that people use — search engines, medical directories, rate-a-doctor sites, business listings, Facebook, Twitter, Friendfeed, Myspace and more," he says.

### **Understanding the price tag**

Even with all the high-tech features available for websites, many practices prefer a modest investment. Pamela Miller, O.D., Highland, Calif., designed her practice's website using a template provided by a managed care provider. While the site offers relatively limited functionality, it does provide information about the practice and staff, promotions, downloadable patient forms, eyecare articles and online contact lens ordering.

Costing about \$300 a year, this approach "is very affordable" and provides a web presence for those who prefer not to design their site themselves or hire a designer, says Dr. Miller.

Other O.D.s recommend avoiding the "plug and play" website design. In his practice management seminars, Dr. Gailmard advises attendees to spend at least \$1,000 on their initial web design.

"The practice website is the new cornerstone of marketing for the practice, and it must present a great image," he says. "Most of the websites I see for independent optometric practices should be replaced with a new design."

In designing his website "from the ground up," Dr. Morris invested \$2,000 for set-up and about \$600 a year for maintenance, which involves "constant tweeks and upgrades." The practice's online store will cost an additional \$1,000.

All told, his practice will spend \$3,000 to \$5,000 through a six-year period. That price tag "is really cheap" when compared to local print advertising or Yellow Page ads, "which have a comparably low return on investment," says Dr. Morris.

### What's your return?

Some O.D.s count page hits and rankings on search engine to figure out the return on their investment (ROI). Others look at easy-to-measure results, such as how many appointments or comments came through the website, how many patients heard about the practice through the site or how much product was sold on the site.

Other key areas of measurement are more subjective and difficult to measure, says Dr. Mayo. "For example, how did the site contribute to helping patients find your practice in an emergency? How much did the site sway patients to make an appointment at your practice? How many patients were able to answer their own questions using the information on your site, as opposed to calling the office and taking up staff or doctor time to get the answer?"

While you can track certain metrics, Dr. Morris says he doesn't believe you can truly measure the impact of a website.

"It's difficult to put a price tag on branding and marketing," he says. "It's difficult to measure how many patients we generate or keep due to the site. I'm not sure how we would measure that."

Dr. Morris says he measures ROI by one simple fact:

"Your website is one of most important business and marketing tools your practice has — period," he says. "If you don't have a website, you simply don't exist to 40% of the population." **OM**

#### Find Them On The Web

The following is a listing of websites of the practices noted in this article:

**DoctorSights** • [www.doctorsights.com](http://www.doctorsights.com)  
**Dr. Pamela Miller** • [www.drpammiller.com](http://www.drpammiller.com)  
**Eye Consultants of Colorado** • [www.eyecolorado.com](http://www.eyecolorado.com)  
**Gailmard Eye Center** • [www.gailmardeyecenter.com](http://www.gailmardeyecenter.com)  
**Kreda Eyecare and Laser Center** • [www.eyerx.net](http://www.eyerx.net)  
**Lange Eye Care & Associates** • <http://langeeyecare.com>

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