

Designing High Quality Health Sites

by © June Kaminski, MSN PhD(c)

This new series continues by looking at health site design, a topic I am personally very familiar with. As a health professional I have spent years designing and teaching others how to design high quality, ethical, appealing and user-friendly health related web sites. To break into this niche, there are a few considerations to incorporate into your marketing approach.



Ensure Ethics and Usability

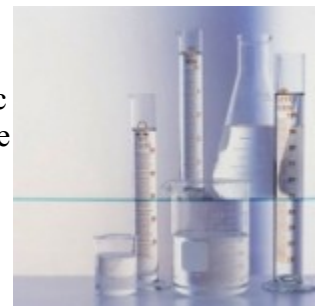
It's a given fact. More and more people are turning to the web for information about a multitude of health topics, including researching health conditions, finding health services, and ordering health products.

There is a lot of money to be made by designers who know how to attract health care professionals and health organizations to their services. Designing a health site is much like designing any other professional site - on the surface. But particular care is necessary to ensure that content is totally reliable and carefully referenced, not to mention 100% accurate. Ethics are a big issue with health care sites: extensive care needs to be taken to ensure accuracy, credibility, user confidentiality, respect for privacy and freedom from plagiarism.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has an excellent [Usability Guide](#) for helping designers and health organizations plan and design usable, useful and accessible web sites and user interfaces. The authors define usability as "Usability is the measure of the quality of a user's experience when interacting with a product or system — whether a Web site, a software application, mobile technology, or any user-operated device." They also point out key factors that ensure usability.

- **Ease of Learning** - can users intuitively learn how to navigate the site without much effort?
- **Efficiency of Use** - once they have grasp the layout, can a user accomplish tasks quickly on the site. For instance, do they know where to click to contact you?
- **Memorability** - on a second or subsequent visit, will a user remember how to navigate the site easily?
- **Error frequency and severity** - how many errors do users make as they attempt to use the site? How serious are these errors? Is error recovery easy or difficult?
- **Subjective Satisfaction** - how much does the user like using the site? Is it appealing and user-friendly?

[eHealthcare](#) offers evaluation services called their Strategic eHealthcare Web Site Evaluation Service based on the comprehensive and extensive methodology used in their [eHealthcare Leadership Awards](#) program. Specific areas that are evaluated include important considerations for any health care site developer. "Detailed evaluation of site's design and usability, organizational branding and communication of service expertise, interactivity, health/healthcare content, care/disease management, e-business, and overall impression. A total of more than 50 areas are evaluated for a healthcare



provider."

Meeting Professional Health Site Criteria

Experts agree that certain aspects of good site design and content development are crucial, especially for health related sites. Since people come to a health site expecting to find valid, useful information from a reliable source, content development must be more carefully and specifically planned and executed than content on other kinds of sites. Main considerations to meet professional expectations are:



- **Privacy** - Governed by the Data Protection Act in the U.S. and other acts in international countries, the use and gathering of personal data is an important consideration when designing forms, subscription areas, patient information components, and so on. Any kind of personal data that identifies a living person must be securely managed and stored. It is important that safeguards are in place to avoid pirating of information. As well, the specific intent must be spelled out - you need to specifically say why you need their personal data and what you intend to do with it. If the data is sensitive, such as ethnicity, gender, health, disabilities, or personal medical numbers, you must collect informed consent approval before even gathering the data. Once gathered, data must be kept confidential and secure, and be deleted once it is no longer needed. This responsibility rests with you, the designer since you are the one who develops the database structure and ensures that these considerations are taken into account. Your client will expect this!
- **Appearance** Sites should be attractive and use graphics only when necessary according to experts, and you should avoid moving images. I agree with this in theory, however, on sites that are teaching about health conditions and the like, graphics and even multimedia can be very useful tools for helping users fully grasp a concept or description.
- **Accessibility** As one might expect, clients who use health sites often suffer from a disability or condition that makes viewing a website more complicated. Visual or skeletal problems can make viewing or sitting to view a web site very difficult. Recommendations to help with this are to make a site easy to access no matter what kind of computer or browser is used; be quick to download and intuitive to navigate; and use easy to read colors and text.
- **Ongoing Content Management Plan** While not every website will have reams of content with continual updates, most large health organizational ones will. It is important to plan the information architecture framework well right from the beginning with a well-defined metadata structure, classification systems using a common controlled vocabulary. This must be constructed within an intuitive and specific user interface with considerations for GUI, visual design, navigation and information design specifics. Content indexing is ongoing for many sites and must be well managed to be user friendly and robust enough to handle considerable growth.
- **Sterling Content** Content should be written by experts in the field, fully supported with documented references. Users rely on the authenticity of the content on health sites - it is important that the designer ensures that the site is set up in such a way that users can find out the source of the content easily.

The Real Criteria from a Consumer Perspective

Although experts tell designers that adherence to privacy issues, reliable content, expert referencing and such is THE criteria used by the general public, Stanford University found out differently. In their study, [How Do People Evaluate a Web Site's Credibility?](#) they found that 46.1% of study participants actually based their judgement of a site's credibility not on standards but on "the overall visual design of a site, including layout, typography, font size and color schemes." So, designers not only need to assure that they meet the breadth, depth, and quality of a site's information guidelines of evaluatory health bodies, but also need to ensure that health sites have eye candy that is both pleasing and easy to access and download.

How to Tap the Niche

There ARE a lot of health related sites on the Internet. But if one compares the number of health care professionals and organizations that exist to the number that have web sites, the discrepancy is staggering. This is a wide open niche indeed!



You may have to sell the health organization on the benefits of offering a comprehensive web site to the public. Points to make include the benefits of:

- **User Empowerment** - when comprehensive client information is available, users can access information readily, anytime of the day. They can also find out exactly what services and treatments are available from a particular organization and initiate initial contact, at their own convenience.
- **Service Access** - A website allows users to directly access services (e.g. repeat prescriptions, make online appointments, online registration and so on)
- **Meet Regulations** - New government policies mandate that users are given access to information about services in order to increase client choice
- **Save Money** - Offering information online reduces the amount of time spent by office staff in answering questions, giving information, clarifying services since users have the information at their fingertips. Users can also refer back to the web site instead of trying to remember what was said to them.
- **Consistent Information** - Often clients are given different or even conflicting information if they request guidance from more than one office staff member. Accessing consistent information presented in visual and written form can help reduce the confusion and provide consistency.
- **Clear Policies and Procedures** - a web site can help professionals and service organizations articulate their internal guidelines in a viable way for both internal and external clarity and guidance.

As for any other type of site, my recommendation is to start locally. Go to "Google" and local city directories and browse your local health care provider and services market. Really analyze the existing web sites (again, the ones you see will likely belong to big organizations with only a few actual individual practitioner sites). Unless you live in a town with only one or two health services, there should be a very viable market waiting to be tapped.

Make sure contact is easy and stream-lined. Forms and email addresses should be readily available as

soon as the user gets the urge to seek further information. As far as graphics go - tailor them to the site's target niche audience (click on image to right for one of my design examples). If a site is focused on prevention and wellness, images of healthy people from all different age groups and ethnic groups would be the safest bet. As well, graphics of actual healing interventions such as herbs, meridian charts, and so on would be appropriate. If for a medical diagnostic site, images of particular healthy and pathological conditions would be educational. as well as a step by step approach to interventions and treatments.

Make a few mockups to use in your marketing campaign as well as flyers, brochures and web advertisements. Approach each health provider or service individually - no spamming! If you make your available packages attractive, reasonably priced, and comprehensive: chances are, a few will bite! Once you get a couple of contracts under your belt, you can gain a local reputation with health organizations in your area, and continue to draw more business. You can also include marketing in your package: offer to handle all of their online marketing initiative including search engine optimization and email marketing templates.

Learn by Observing

[Dr. Joseph Mercola](#) offers a listing on the top health site rankings for both natural health and medical health related sites determined by the Alexa visitors ranking system. These rankings depend entirely on amount of visitors and are presented to show the rankings of the Mercola site. Still, the information is very useful to designers who wish to design sites that DO attract users to them. To go straight to the horse's mouth, you can also access the actual current [Alexa rankings](#) of health sites as well. Remember, the lower the ranking number, the higher the actual popularity. So, being ranked #1 is much better than being #1,000. As well, the [Consumer and Patient Health Information Section](#) (CAPHIS) of MLA evaluates web sites based on the following criteria: credibility, sponsorship/authorship, content, audience, currency, disclosure, purpose, links, design, interactivity, and disclaimers. You can keep your eye on the "Top 10 Health Sites" to subjectively collect data and "see" what makes a site popular by examining their designs, content layout, and so on.



There are a growing number of web designers who offer health and other medical related designs. The trick to creating your own niche, especially if you wish to work on an international basis, is to create your own unique look. Work on designs that stand out from the rest, that go beyond the classic multi-column "template" look. By simply plugging "health or medical web design" you can find many companies that offer effective but rather standard design. You want to make yours stand out from the rest.