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# THE EDITOR'S CORNER

## Dr. Jones.com

Growing numbers of orthodontists are turning to web-design services to develop and maintain a presence on the Internet. The main function of these websites is advertising to the general public, and from early reports, they appear to be working. The sites are attracting a large number of "hits" from parties interested in seeking information about orthodontic treatment or in arranging a visit to an orthodontic office.

It remains to be seen whether this form of advertising will be any more satisfying than previous forms of advertising have been. Will it solicit what Dr. Pankey called the Type A patient, or is it a form of bottom-fishing? It seems too early to know, but there appears to be some merit in the claims of management service organizations that they are attracting new patients from outside the traditional patient family profile. In addition, it seems likely that prospective adult patients may be surfing the Internet seeking information and a convenient orthodontic office for themselves. Given that the number of adult orthodontic patients has leveled off in recent years, there would appear to be some possibility of growth here.

Internet advertising has the virtue of funneling an almost limitless amount of information about orthodontics to potential consumers. After a time, it may replace Yellow Pages and other print advertising, which has its limitations and which, according to responses to the JCO Orthodontic Practice Studies, is not very effective.

Just as Yellow Pages advertising grew in response to competition, so will Internet advertising grow. As the hundreds of orthodontic sites become thousands, however, browsing will become a daunting prospect. Not every site can be among the first 10 produced by a search; the various search engines are constantly bombarded by keywords from websites hoping to get to the top of the list. It may become necessary to use another medium, such as print advertising, Web Yellow Pages, banner ads or links on other sites, TV, or direct mail to promote a particular Internet address—in other words, to advertise an advertisement.

Also, it seems somewhat extravagant to send a local message out on the World Wide Web. While it is already possible to narrow a search by specifying, for instance, both "orthodontics" and "Colorado", there may eventually be more restrictive search engines that will keep the consumer's choices to a manageable number. For now, there remain certain limitations. Even though Internet advertising by professionals may become more acceptable than traditional forms of advertising, if only because of the educational aspect, it may take some advances in technology to overcome the obvious deficiencies.

Of course, the potential of the Internet goes far beyond advertising. It is the quintessential medium for communication in real time and at any time. The dissemination of information on demand is among the revolutions wrought by the Web. The use of e-mail to transfer files has become routine, and the transfer of photo and x-ray images by e-mail is already adequate and virtually instantaneous. As communication speeds and logistics improve, and high-speed data lines become more commonplace, access to websites will also be instantaneous, accommodating busy people who presently lack the time and patience to surf the Web, remarkable as it is.

With the speed-up in the transfer of data will come faster-loading and higher-resolution

motion pictures. We have already seen a university and a dental school that are pushing the limits of off-site education using less sophisticated technology. It is no longer essential to attend an educational facility at one fixed site for much of one's education. The implications for the future of organizational meetings and courses seem obvious. The meetings and courses will come to the individual, and interactively. The audio and video of closed-circuit presentations will be upgraded by combining the technology of the Internet with that of cable or satellite television. Eventually, most journals and books will be available online.

It is not too great a stress on the imagination to contemplate the use of the Internet in orthodontic treatment. The frequency of office visits may one day be greatly reduced by sending the patient home with an oral scanner that can map the dentition and relay the information to the orthodontist, and a receiver into which the orthodontist can feed instructions to a micro-mechanical force system. If that seems too extreme, how about monitoring retention with such a system? As a first step, that may already be feasible. Remember that Jules Verne contemplated going to the moon at a time when his means of getting there were no more credible than those advanced by Cyrano de Bergerac. ELG

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