

Conquering the net

Nigel Reece, owner of Dental Design, tells you how to get the most from your website with search engine optimisation

One aspect of globalisation is inescapable for even the most parochial business activity; maximising the benefits of the internet.

Very few UK dental practices, even among the corporates, would presume to prefix or suffix their names with the word 'international,' and yet nearly all have a presence on the internet. Remembering that thousands of new websites are listed with major search engines like Google and Yahoo every day of the year, how do you make sure that yours doesn't become swamped in the deluge of others offering similar services, or with similar names?

Search engine optimisation is crucial if you want your website to pay its way. It is no good investing in a smart, new site that puts those of your competitors to shame if you fail to keep it up to date and it plummets to the bottom of the search engine rankings. In plain language, the higher up the search engine rankings your site appears, the more visitors you'll get and the more likely they'll be to pursue the acquaintance.

Once upon a time, in the good old days (or not, depending on your point of view!) prospective patients simply phoned their local

practice and made an appointment. Today, that same prospective patient will hit the internet to shop around, browsing the sites of any number of practices for the one that offers just what they're looking for at the right price. Patients are happy to travel for treatment too, if they are convinced by the practice's website that it offers the best care or the best value.

Reaching out

Sitting at his or her computer, the surfer types a vague description into one of the popular search engines, 'tooth whitening dentist,' for example. Most will add a location; say 'London,' or 'Liverpool,' or 'Berkshire' or wherever they live. Nevertheless, however narrow the designated search area, in seconds the screen is populated with an endless stream of names.

Running just such a search for 'tooth whitening dentist London' yielded 163,000 results. Naturally they were not all relevant, but suppose your practice website was one of them? The words 'needle' and 'haystack' spring to mind.

Now imagine you had just spent a lot of money to create a spectacular, cutting

edge website, wouldn't it be wonderful if it was one of the first results to come up on screen?

Of course, your own patients and personal callers will probably be equipped with practice literature in some form with your web address included, but potential patients who don't know about you have only the list to look at. Just how many of 163,000 websites do you suppose they'll actually visit? And however long or short the list, nobody inspects every location. Can you afford to let thousands of pounds of business pass you by because your website is far down the list and never seen by the very people it's intended to attract?

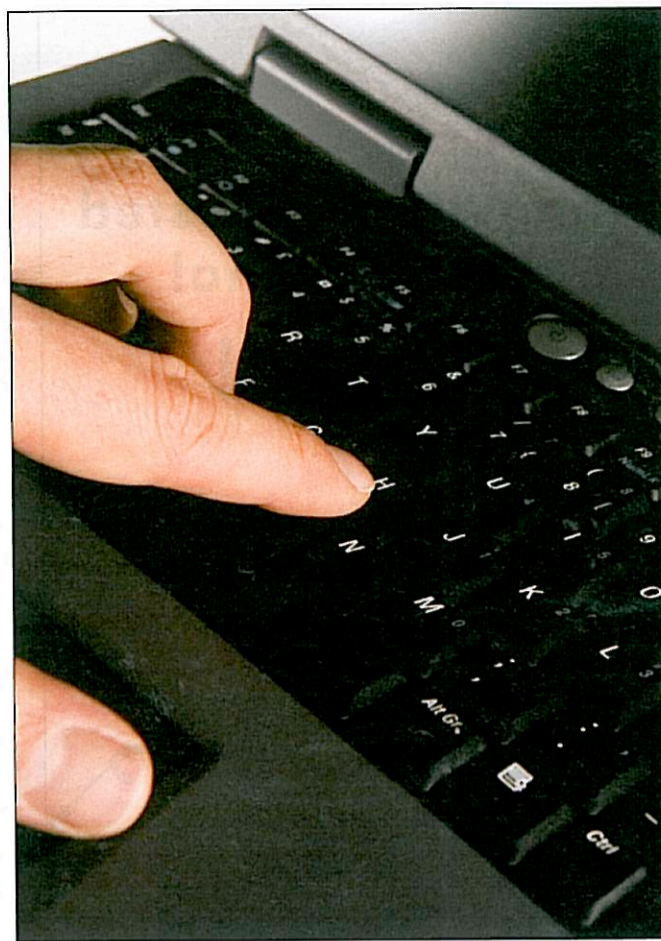
When you're having a website designed or renovated, make sure the company you engage can provide effective search engine optimisation. It takes hard work and dedication for your site to climb the rankings, but with regular updates and the applied expertise of a team of internet professionals, you should start to see more and more people coming in through your front door (or at least contacting you directly for more information on your treatments). Search engine optimisation is a key

part of website design and if a design company doesn't offer this service – or isn't able to back up its claims with numerous testimonials from satisfied customers – you need to look elsewhere.

Maintaining the visits

Regular updates are also vital to ensure that any changes to your services or personnel are promptly included. Your web provider must also exploit the full key words to help you maintain a high position in the on-screen rankings – if you expand your activities into orthodontics, or implants, or begin to specialise in perio treatments, typing in these words should bring you instant on-screen pre-eminence.

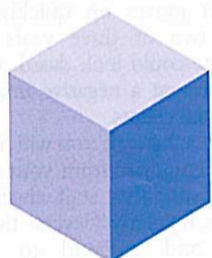
Advertising of any kind only works if the intended market sees it. We may all become bored with an over-exposed TV commercial, but we can't pretend we don't know about the product. Your website must get noticed to be effective and don't just regularly check the hit count – if only a very few of your new patients come to you from a web contact, your site needs attention and you're neglecting a major source of new business. ■



For friendly advice on all your website needs, contact Dental Design by telephone on 01202 677277 or visit www.dental-design.co.uk.

Following an extensive and successful marketing career that spanned 15 years working with blue chip companies such as Marks & Spencer, Mars and BUPA, Nigel Reece became head of the team that launched the BUPA DentalCover product to the UK dental market. Nigel went on to manage the sales and marketing team for three years before leaving to launch a recruitment agency for the dental profession. Nigel founded Dental Design Ltd in 2000.

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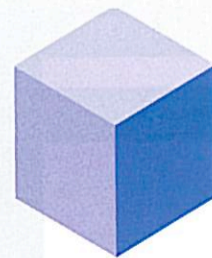
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