



## Private Practice Marketing & Branding Part Five

# A Guide to Advanced Digital Strategies

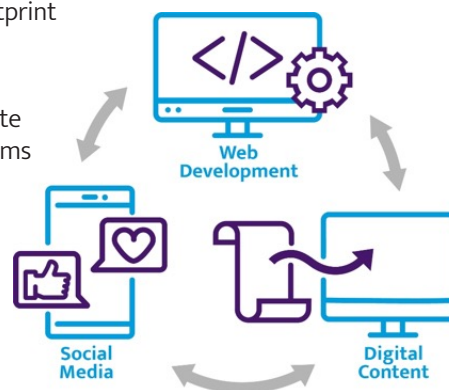
This Learning Guide focuses on assisting private practice physicians to understand better the critical role of digital and online strategies in strengthening their market position. It builds upon the information in the [Basic Digital Strategies](#) Primer. It will provide a more in-depth look at how private practice physicians can create a comprehensive digital footprint to attract and keep patients, as well as how to improve patient service and satisfaction through a better online experience.

Implementing a digital strategy requires a great degree of knowledge and expertise. Private practice physicians are advised to seek out the counsel and support of a qualified digital partner, and this Guide includes insights on how to choose and work with a vendor.

## Importance of Developing a Connected Digital Footprint

In the modern digital landscape, physician practices must maintain a solid digital footprint and align their independent digital channels to create a cohesive online presence.

This entails integrating the website, social media, content marketing, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and online reputation efforts to reinforce one another. The website serves as the central hub of your digital space. At the same time, social media platforms enable engagement, areas for thought leadership and the ability to humanize the practice via social posts. Content marketing establishes thought leadership and SEO optimization enhances online visibility. Lastly, maintaining a positive online reputation is crucial for building trust. By aligning these digital channels, physician practices can establish a robust online presence, attract new patients and referring physicians/practices, increase their reputation among peers and ultimately cultivate lasting growth and success.



By developing a cohesive digital footprint that is easily updated, you can accomplish the following:

- For patients and potential patients, your digital presence helps those seeking care to identify and select you and validates their decision to choose you for their care.
- For your peers and other providers, your digital presence helps increase referrals and improves your status among peers as an expert in your discipline.
- Critical to both audiences, you can stay updated and develop a digital presence that showcases your expertise and positions you in an up-to-date, relevant manner.

Patients and potential patients now use digital channels as the predominant way they look for and select physicians.

1. **Online Searches for Health Care Providers:** over 60% of consumers search for a provider before scheduling an appointment.<sup>1</sup>
2. **Health Care Provider Reviews:** 94% of patients evaluate providers with online reviews.<sup>2</sup>
3. **Appointment Scheduling:** Patients prefer to make appointments online 43% of the time.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Social Media Influence:** 41% of patients reported that social media influenced their choice of a health care provider.<sup>4</sup>

Providers also search online to find and connect with their peers and other specialists.

- Physicians perform an average of six professional searches a day.
- 68% of physicians are prompted to use a search engine because a patient seeks more information during a consult.<sup>5</sup>
- 84% of physicians search on condition-related keyword terms. Only 17% search pharmaceutical manufacturer terms.<sup>5</sup>

## Choosing and Working With a Vendor

### Credentials

Implementing the following digital strategies requires an extensive amount of knowledge and expertise. While it is important for private practice owners to understand the concepts and techniques of a digital strategy, your focus is on patient care; therefore, it is important to partner with a qualified vendor to assist with digital marketing to guide your decisions and save you time and resources.

When looking at website developers or digital media firms, here are some credentials to consider:

- Medical practice expertise; familiar with ADA compliance, HIPAA, and other security/data issues unique to physician practices
- Understanding and expertise in SEO and other aspects of content and website maintenance/management
- Referrals from local colleagues for expertise, service and “connectivity” to your complete digital footprint

### Expectations and goal setting

Here are some guidelines for establishing a trustworthy and mutually beneficial relationship with a vendor in the digital space.

Determine goals up front and develop your digital strategy to achieve them.

- Agree on expectations and reporting.
  - Monthly analytics report, including website visits, click-through rates and other important visitor information.
  - Quarterly maintenance updates to address any performance issues or new opportunities.
  - Firms usually include maintenance and SEO in quarterly service fees.
  - For a new website and/or overhaul, agree on pricing up-front with contingency (+/- 10%) for unexpected or opportunistic alterations.
- Other expectations
  - Use of all images and photographs should be approved or purchased from stock resources; free images are available. A vendor, if one is used, should establish in writing that permission has been granted.
  - Website should be responsive (for both mobile and desktop/other devices)
  - Trouble-shooting agreement in terms of response time and cost (if not covered in maintenance fee)

### Questions to ask when choosing the right vendor for you

- Do you have experience with medical practice in my area of specialty or among my patient demographics?
- Do you have references and sites that I can review and contact?
- How quickly will you troubleshoot my site if there’s an issue?
- What does monthly “maintenance” look like?
- Does your firm incorporate SEO and other optimizing tactics into the build/rebuild?
- Can I make changes to the site as administrator?
- What program(s) do you use and which do you recommend for my practice? Why?

## Optimizing Your Website

In a connected digital environment, your website is the center of all activity. It is the authoritative place where audiences will learn more about you, select and schedule their care and refer to various stages of their care journey. To that end, consider expanding your website to include the following content items:

### Website Content “Must Haves”

- **Biographies/CVs Best Practices:** Including detailed biographies and CVs of physicians helps build trust and credibility with potential patients and peers. Patients often look for information about a doctor’s qualifications, specialties and experience before making an appointment.
- **Unique Competitive Differentiator/Marketing Advantage:** Highlighting your practices unique competitive position can set you apart from others in your area of expertise and community. This content can showcase specialized expertise, cutting-edge technology, low wait times or exceptional patient care to attract patients seeking specific services.
- **Other Practice Information:** Providing comprehensive practice information such as languages spoken, office hours (including weekends), affiliations with hospitals or medical organizations, services offered, and procedures performed ensures that patients have all the necessary details to make informed decisions about their health care choices.

### Website Content “Nice-to-Have” Elements

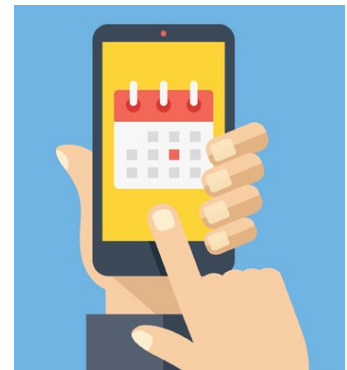
- **Reviews/Testimonials:** Including reviews and testimonials on a physician practice website can build trust and credibility, reassuring potential patients about the quality of care and positive experiences others share.
- **Patient Resources/Specialty-Relevant Terms Dictionary and Appropriate Writing Levels:** Providing patient resources and a specialty-relevant terms dictionary can improve patient education and understanding, making health care information more accessible. Ensuring appropriate writing levels (grade level 8 or lower). cater to diverse audiences, improving overall user experience.
- **Blog Posts, Links to News Features or Other Media Coverage:** A blog section featuring news links or media coverage showcases the practice’s expertise, innovation, and community engagement, enhancing the website’s authority and engagement potential. These additions contribute to a more comprehensive and informative user experience.
- **Background On Your Administrative Staff and Other Offer Personnel That Have Patient Interactions.**

Ensuring your practice website contains these elements not only helps visitors find information about your practice, but it also enhances transparency and improves patient experience.

### Website User Experience Enhancements

While some visitors come to your website to learn more about your practice, introducing online tools to help them select and schedule care is critically important for enhancing the website user experience. Consider implementing the following to improve your website usability, all of which may be functionality offered through the EHR patient portal:

- **Online Appointment Scheduling:** Online appointment scheduling enhances user convenience by allowing patients to book appointments at their preferred time without the need for phone calls or waiting on hold, streamlining the process and reducing frustration.
- **Online Bill Pay:** Offering online bill pay simplifies the payment process for patients, providing a seamless and secure platform to settle bills, improving satisfaction, and reducing administrative burdens on both patients and the practice.
- **Online Forms (Pre-Appointment Registration, etc.):** Online forms for pre-appointment registration and other purposes expedite the check-in process, saving time for patients and minimizing paperwork during the visit, resulting in a smoother and more efficient experience and even having these forms as downloadable documents that patients can print and bring to your practice will save them time and make registration smoother.



## Other Website Technical Considerations

Your website needs to have important information about your practice and provide usable tools to engage with you and comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), and payment card industry (PCI) regulations.

### ADA/World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Compliance

ADA/W3C compliance matters for physician practice websites because it ensures accessibility for all users, including those with disabilities, enabling equal access to health care information and services. **Ensuring your website is ADA-compliant is essential to avoid potential litigation.**

The W3C oversees a Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), which develops technical specifications, guidelines, techniques and supporting resources that describe accessibility solutions. These are considered international standards for web accessibility and comply with ADA guidelines.

Check these items to determine if your practice's site complies:

- Mobile Responsiveness:** Ensure your website is accessible and functions correctly on mobile devices.
- Alt Text for Images:** Provide descriptive alt text for images to accommodate users with visual impairments.
- Keyboard Accessibility:** Ensure all website functions can be accessed and operated using a keyboard for users who cannot use a mouse.
- Contrast Ratio:** Maintain sufficient contrast between text and background colors for improved readability.
- Text Size and Scalability:** Use relative font sizes, allowing users to adjust text size without loss of readability.
- Form Accessibility:** Ensure forms are accessible to all users, including those with screen readers.
- Navigation Structure:** Organize website navigation in a logical and consistent manner, making it easy to navigate for all users.
- Audio and Video Accessibility:** Provide closed captions or transcripts for media content to accommodate users with hearing impairments.
- Accessible PDFs and Documents:** Ensure PDFs and other documents are accessible to screen readers and assistive technologies.
- ARIA Labels and Roles:** Use ARIA (Accessible Rich Internet Applications) labels and roles to enhance accessibility for interactive elements.
- Skip Navigation Link:** Include a skip navigation link "at the top of the page, allowing users to bypass repetitive content.

### ADA's position on website compliance

"Inaccessible web content means that people with disabilities are denied equal access to information. An inaccessible website can exclude people just as much as steps at an entrance to a physical location. Ensuring web accessibility for people with disabilities is a priority."

Ensure that those who manage your site are familiar with the standards of data security and HIPAA related to your website. Here are some online resources to consider:

HHS.gov's guidance: [Use of Online Tracking Technologies by HIPAA Covered Entities and Business Associates](#)

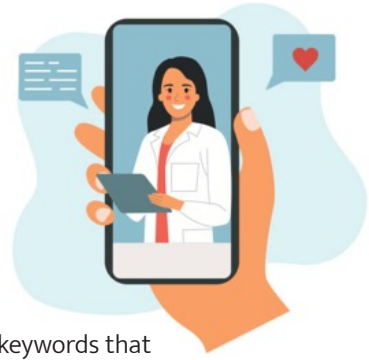
[AHA Letter to OCR on HIPAA Privacy Rule, Online Tracking Guidance](#)

### HIPAA and Data Security Standards for Your Site

Understanding how your physician practice site aligns with HIPAA and data security standards is important to protect sensitive patient information and comply with legal requirements. As a health care provider, your practice website likely handles personal health information (PHI), such as appointment scheduling, online payments, etc., making it essential to implement robust security measures to safeguard patient data from unauthorized access or breaches. By ensuring HIPAA compliance and adhering to data security standards, you demonstrate a commitment to patient privacy and trust, fostering a secure and reassuring online experience.

## SEO and Online Reputation

Search Engine Optimization enhances a website and its content to improve its visibility and ranking in search engine results. The primary goal of SEO is to increase organic (non-paid) traffic to a website by making it more relevant and attractive to search engines.



### SEO Terminology Basics to Know

- **Keywords:** Phrases users enter that describes the content when looking for information. Incorporating relevant keywords into website content helps search engines understand your site's relevance to specific queries. Tip: Consider using keywords that a patient would use when searching for services. "Keyword stuffing is harmful to SEO because it unnaturally involves overloading a webpage with excessive keywords, leading to poor user experience and violating search engine guidelines. Search engines (like Google) penalize keyword stuffing by recognizing it as a manipulative practice that often doesn't provide valuable content. Such tactics can result in lower search rankings or even removal from search results. Instead, SEO efforts should prioritize creating high-quality, user-friendly content that genuinely addresses users' needs while adhering to search engine guidelines."
- **Meta Tags:** Tags in a web page's hypertext markup language (html) that provide information about a web page to search engines. The two most common meta tags are the meta title (title tag) and meta description, which appear in search engine results.
- **Backlinks:** Links from other websites that point to your site. Quality backlinks from reputable sources can improve a site's authority and search engine rankings.
- **Organic Traffic:** Visitors who reach your website through unpaid (organic) search engine results rather than through paid advertisements.
- **SERP:** The Search Engine Results Page is what search engines use based on a user's query, displaying a list of relevant websites and other content.
- **Crawling and Indexing:** The process by which search engines' bots (spiders or crawlers) visit websites, read their content and store information in their databases (index). This enables search engines to deliver relevant results quickly when a user searches for specific keywords.
- **Algorithm:** A set of rules and calculations used by search engines to determine the relevance and ranking of websites in search results.
- **Title Tag:** An HTML element that specifies the title of a web page. It appears in the browser tab and is often used as the clickable headline in search engine results.
- **Meta Description:** An HTML element that summarizes a web page's content. It appears in search engine results and influences user click-through rates.
- **Alt Text:** Short for alternative text, it's a description added to images on a website. Alt text is essential for accessibility and helps search engines understand the content of images.

Understanding these basic SEO terms can help the owners and marketers of a physician practice optimize their content and improve their search engine rankings, increasing site visibility and traffic.

### SEO Terminology

Keywords and phrases are essential for SEO because they bridge what users are searching for and the website content. Here's why they are crucial:

- **Relevance:** Keywords and phrases reflect a website's topics, products or services. By using relevant keywords in website content, search engines can understand the site's purpose and relevance to specific user queries.
- **Search Engine Ranking:** When a website incorporates relevant keywords strategically, search engines are more likely to rank it higher in search results. Improved rankings increase visibility and attract more organic traffic to the site.
- **User Intent:** Understanding the intent behind users' search queries allows website owners to tailor their content to meet the users' needs. Websites that feature the right keywords can attract users seeking information, products or services your practice offers.

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- **Competitive Advantage:** By researching and using targeted keywords, websites can differentiate themselves from competitors, granting a competitive edge in attracting relevant traffic.
- **Content Organization:** Keywords help structure website content and guide the creation of relevant and informative material. Organized content improves user experience and encourages visitors to explore the site further.
- **Long-Term Traffic:** Ranking well for evergreen keywords can generate steady and long-term organic traffic to a website. This sustainable traffic source can reduce reliance on paid advertising.
- **Local SEO:** Businesses that serve customers in the immediate vicinity can use location-specific keywords to appear in local search results, reaching potential customers.
- **Measure and Improve Performance:** Analyzing keyword performance through tools like Google Analytics allows website owners to understand which keywords are driving traffic and conversions. This data helps refine SEO strategies for continuous improvement.

Overall, keywords and phrases form the foundation of effective SEO strategies. By understanding user search intent, using relevant keywords and optimizing website content accordingly, businesses can enhance their online visibility, attract targeted traffic and ultimately achieve their marketing objectives.

## Online Reputation

Online reputation refers to the perception and image of a doctor or health care provider as portrayed through online channels, such as review sites, social media and other online platforms. Potential patients often rely on these online reviews and information to decide about choosing a health care provider. A positive online reputation can build trust, attract more patients and enhance the doctor's credibility. A negative online reputation may deter patients.

A recent study indicated that 83% of consumers searching for health care believe online reviews play an essential role in decision-making<sup>6</sup>

Managing online reputation is important for building patient trust and confidence, influencing patient choice, enhancing credibility and contributing to practice growth and referrals. The good news is that many of these online review sites allow providers to "claim" their listings directly.

By taking ownership of your listings and keeping them up to date, they will be accurate and can also offer insight into when reviews are posted. Some 3rd party review sites to consider as part of your online reputation efforts include:

- Google My Business
- WebMD
- HealthGrades
- Yelp
- RateMDs
- Vitals
- Patient Pop

## Claiming your online listings

Following these steps will help focus efforts and allow for the maximum impact on online results. Often this process can be tedious – if helpful, enlist an office manager or someone in your practice to assist with these steps:

- **Google Your Name** – in multiple variations. For example: "Dr. Janet Smith," "Dr. J Smith," "Janet Smith MD," "Doctor Janet Smith," etc. Keep track of all third-party sites appearing on the first page of results.  
**Tip:** Copy and paste the specific URLs of your physician listing on these third-party sites into a Word document that you can refer to later.
- **Audit the Search Results** – for each third-party site, review your listing and keep an eye out for the accuracy of these things: address, contact information, practice information, photo (current), board-certified specialty, etc.  
**Tip:** Create a master record of what your profile should be and maintain that consistency across all third-party sites.
- **Claim Your Listing** – for each third-party site, directly claim your listing from that site. Remember, the authentication process is different for each, so be prepared.  
**Tip:** Authentication will often require either an email or phone validation or licensing information.
- **Maximize the Listing** – once the listing is claimed, go back to the listing and add all missing information, including an updated photo, bio information, additional sub-specialties (if possible) and contact information to reach your practice directly.  
**Tip:** Add information useful to consumers, including layperson terminology for your specialty expertise.



## Social Media & Content Strategy

Patients and referring providers use different social channels to find information about doctors due to their distinct needs and objectives. Patients primarily use social media to gather real-life experiences and recommendations from fellow patients to find a provider they can trust and feel comfortable with. On the other hand, the referring providers' objective is to assess a doctor's professional credentials, expertise, and compatibility for referrals or collaborations. They are more likely to use professional networking sites and medical association websites for this information.

### Patients typically search:

- Online reviews and rating platforms like Google My Business, Yelp, Healthgrades and RateMDs to read reviews and view ratings left by other patients. They seek insights into a doctor's patient care, bedside manner, waiting times and overall satisfaction to make informed decisions.
- Social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram to follow and engage with doctors or health care practices. They turn to social media for updates on medical services, health tips and the provider's community involvement.
- Patients also participate in health forums and patient communities, such as PatientsLikeMe or HealthUnlocked, to seek peer experiences, recommendations and support.



### Referring providers turn to:

- Professional networking sites like LinkedIn to connect with colleagues and access their professional profiles to facilitate referrals and collaborations among health care providers.
- Medical association and organization websites that are relevant to their specialty or field since they offer directories of member physicians, educational resources and the latest medical advancements.

Because all social media channels are not the same and participating in social media can be resource-intensive, it's always best to approach your social media efforts strategically. For every social channel you are considering, develop a "social media purpose statement" and editorial calendar outlining the channel, the audience(s) you are trying to reach and the type of content you will use to reach them. A consistent and timely posting strategy will keep you "front and center" among your current and potential patients.

## Create Once, Publish Everywhere Content Strategy

The "Create Once, Publish Everywhere" (COPE) strategy involves creating high-quality content once and re-purposing it across multiple platforms and digital channels. The goal is to maximize content reach and impact while minimizing the effort and resources needed to produce it.

When done right, COPE ensures consistent messaging and a cohesive brand identity while adapting content to reach the audience on different platforms.

## Search Engine Marketing

Search Engine Marketing (SEM) has become essential to modern digital marketing strategies for physicians and medical practices. While the following is designed as an advanced primer to help inform you of how best to leverage SEM in an integrated digital environment, it is recommended to partner with a digital vendor or agency to best help you with optimizing your paid advertising strategies.

## Organic vs. Paid Search: Understanding the Difference

Organic search refers to the natural, unpaid listings displayed on search engine results pages (SERPs). These results are determined by search engine algorithms and are based on relevancy to the user's query. Organic search is achieved through search engine optimization, improving website content, structure and relevance to rank higher in search results. It can build long-term credibility and trust with patients. Higher organic rankings establish your expertise and authority in your field, leading to sustainable traffic and patient acquisition. However, achieving top organic rankings can take time and requires consistent effort in SEO practices.

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Paid search or pay-per-click (PPC) advertising involves displaying ads on search engines and other platforms. Advertisers bid on keywords relevant to their business, and their ads appear when users search for those keywords. Advertisers only pay when users click on their ads, making it a cost-effective way to reach potential patients. Paid search offers immediate visibility and can drive instant traffic to your website. It is highly effective for targeted campaigns, promotions or time-sensitive events, such as seasonal vaccines and health fairs. By reaching the right audience with relevant ads, paid search can deliver faster results compared to organic search.

## SEM Best Practices

Often SEM is referred to as “SEO Now” – because it both can deliver faster results than organic search (i.e., “pay to play”), but also because it often involves the same type of discipline as SEO strategy. Some best practices involving SEM include:

- **Keyword Research:** Conduct thorough keyword research to identify relevant and high-value keywords. Use tools like Google Keyword Planner to discover popular search terms that patients use to find medical services like yours.
- **Compelling Ad Copy:** Write compelling and relevant ad copy highlighting your unique selling points. A clear call-to-action (CTA) can encourage potential patients to click on your ads and contact your practice.
- **Landing Page Optimization:** Create dedicated landing pages for your ads, tailored to match the ad’s content. Ensure that landing pages provide valuable information and a seamless user experience to improve conversion rates.
- **Ad Scheduling and Budgeting:** Optimize ad scheduling to display ads during peak times when potential patients are most active. Set a budget that aligns with your marketing goals and continuously monitor campaign performance to make necessary adjustments.

## Optimizing SEM Efforts with Search Engines

To maximize your SEM efforts to better position your ad results on search engines, it’s best to consider options such as:

- **Google Ads:** Utilize Google Ads (formerly known as Google AdWords) to set up and manage your PPC campaigns. Choose relevant keywords, create ad groups, set bids and track performance using Google Ads’ intuitive platform.
- **Google My Business (GMB):** Ensure your practice is listed and updated on Google My Business. GMB listings improve local search visibility and provide essential information to potential patients, such as location, contact details and reviews.
- **Google Analytics:** Use Google Analytics to track website traffic, user behavior and conversion rates. This data helps you understand your SEM effectiveness and make data-driven decisions to optimize your campaigns.

## Basic SEM Terms

To best familiarize yourself with SEM campaigns, it’s important to understand the essential terminology used, such as:

- **Keywords:** Phrases that describe the business practice or service people are searching for. Choosing the right keywords is essential in that it will optimize your ads against those terms people are searching for online.
- **Impressions:** The number of times your ad is shown to users on the search results page or display network.
- **Click-Through Rate (CTR):** The percentage of ad impressions that result in a click. CTR is a key metric to measure ad performance.
- **Conversion:** A desired action completed by a user, such as filling out a contact form or making an appointment. Conversions indicate the effectiveness of your SEM campaign in generating leads.
- **Quality Score:** A rating by search engines that reflects the relevance and quality of your ads and landing pages. Higher-quality scores can lead to lower costs and better ad rankings.

### Footnotes and Sources

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.invoca.com/blog/healthcare-marketing-statistics>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.softwareadvice.com/resources/how-patients-use-online-reviews/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://financesonline.com/appointment-scheduling-statistics/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://demicooper.com/?project=social-mobile-use-in-healthcare>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/search/the-doctors-digital-path-to-treatment/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey/>

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