

# Untangling the web



Clare Butler, of Onstream Communications, looks from a pet owner's perspective at how you convey your services to clients

I should say at the start, that this article about the internet is not going to be full of technological jargon and computer geekery. It is possible to talk about the worldwide web without understanding what on earth 'bandwidth', 'SSL', 'ISP' and 'cookies' are; believe me I have no idea either. Suffice to say, that contrary to popular belief in the veterinary world, 'www' does not stand for 'Website? Why worry?'

In our private lives, most of us are using the internet more and more, indeed according to a 2007 National Statistics Omnibus Survey, 61 per cent of the UK population now has internet access. With internet shopping, social networking, blogs and e-mail accounts now very much part of the modern age, it's true to say that the internet has revolutionised the way we buy goods and services and communicate with our friends and clients.

Speaking way back in 1996, Bill Clinton hit the nail on the head when he quipped "When I took office, only high energy physicists had ever heard of what is called the worldwide web ... now even my cat has its own page."

Yet in the veterinary sector, only a few enlightened practices have really grasped the opportunities offered by the internet. I typed "vets" into Yell.com for my area, and was presented with phone numbers and addresses for 32 local practices. Of these, a measly nine have websites, which works out at a rather poor 28 per cent.

Further investigation revealed that three of these 'websites' are actually a holding page bearing the legend 'website under construction', which means only six out of

the 32 practices, or 18 per cent of those touting for my business, have a website I can visit to find out more about the practice.

In reality, only a couple of these websites would make me want to find out more about the practice. Few featured basic information, such as opening hours or photos of staff members, or even any pictures of animals. Several were out of date, with an "August Newsletter" languishing miserably in the "Latest News" section of one practice, and another referring

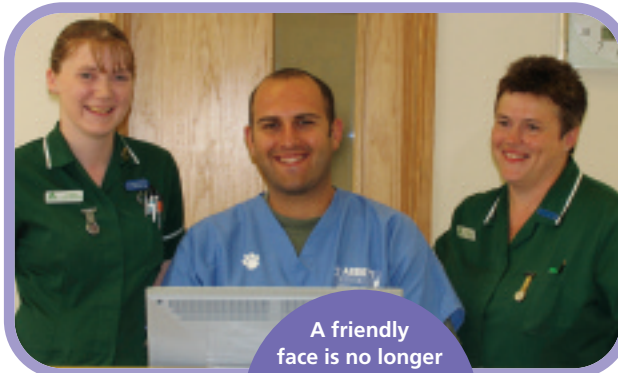
to new equipment installed "last year (2005)". A couple had home pages filled with far too much text, laid out in awful shouty red fonts, which

made me click right on to the next practice.

One website stood head and shoulders above the rest, with a bright, easy to navigate layout, lots of photos of staff members, premises and clients (of the two-and four-legged varieties), frequently asked questions and details about opening hours. Not only does this website give me all the information I need about the practice, but far more importantly it's doing a great PR job – "Look at us," it screams, "We're bright and modern, we know what our clients want and we love animals." As a potential client, I know where I would take my business.

Based on nothing more scientific than the law of averages and my quick and dirty survey, I'm guessing that three quarters of you good people reading this article are sitting in a practice that does not have its own website. Which is not that great really, is it?

And yet it could all be so different –



A friendly face is no longer enough. You need to capture clients before they come through the door!

“‘Look at us,’ it screams, ‘We’re bright and modern, we know what our clients want and we love animals’”

most of us have a friend who knows a bit about the internet and who could create a simple website for you, there’s probably even someone at your practice, if you ask. If not, creating and hosting a website for your practice can be managed quickly, easily and cost effectively for you, and for around the cost of an average client transaction each month, it will no doubt pay for itself in no time.

If you’re still not sure that you need a website, then let me introduce you to a good friend of mine, who is looking to buy a horse for her daughter. She’s new to the village and has seen Penny, who has real potential to be ‘the one’.

Now she just needs to get a vet to check Penny out, but the only vet she knows in the village already has Penny on her books, so she has to look elsewhere.

Surfing the internet proved to be the solution, and having been very happy with the newly discovered vet, my friend will undoubtedly stay with the practice once she has brought Penny home.

Sure, she’s only one person, but she’s going to be spending a lot of money over the years, and she talks to her friends, and she’s just one person I know about in that mystical 61 per cent of us with internet access. You can do the maths.

So, if you agree that maybe your practice could do with dragging into the

internet age, how to go about it? A good place to start is by doing some surfing yourself – check out your local has a website, and more importantly, who has a *good* website.

Once you’ve worked out for yourself what you like, you’re pretty close to understanding what your clients are going to like too, and it’s probably going to be something along the lines of:

**Easy-to-find information.** Don’t stick everything on the home page, lay out your site with clearly separated pages for each area: opening hours, special interests, staff members, frequently asked questions, how to find us, contact details, out-of-hours emergencies, etc.

**Bright and interesting.** Photos of the practice, pictures of animals, logos, and accreditations are all good visual elements to break up a page. Don’t have reams of words, and use short paragraphs, bullet points and headlines to summarise information easily for the surfer in a hurry.

Simple and gimmick-free. You probably want to avoid swirly fonts, busy backgrounds, lots of animations, twinkly Japanese Zen music and sound effects. You’ll get people’s attention, but probably not their business.

**Up to date.** Unless you have the time and the inclination to regularly update your site with the ‘latest’ news, then keep it simple and don’t put up anything on it that’s going to date.

So there you have it, websites really can be that simple. A small investment of time and money to create a good website for your practice will not only buy you a powerful advertising medium that needs very little maintenance, but it will lift you out of the ordinary, and ahead of your competition.

Websites? We’re winning!

