

Essentials of Web Design for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and Other Allied Health Professionals

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The Internet changed the way many people live their lives and run their businesses. As a counselor or health professional, using the Internet to deliver information and provide service to your clients can be a benefit to clients, yourself, and your agency. Getting a website up and running could be easily done if you utilize the new web services that streamline the entire process of webpage development from conceptualization to completion. The professional must take control over the costly expenses of web design by doing it yourself or save money by doing what you can and then outsourcing the rest to a professional. Along with the new waves of technological advancements come a new set of laws and ethical standards regarding the content, advertisement and use of your website or any online engagements between your agency and its' clients. It is imperative that you fully understand the regulations involved with any activity concerning your agencies' online presence. You must learn the new Internet guidelines but also be sure to follow the normal guidelines for practicing ethical counseling. This article offers a framework for the rehabilitation professional to develop their website. A listing of recommended readings is also offered.

Essentials of Web Design for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and Other Allied Health Professionals

Are you ready to take your rehabilitation or healthcare agency to the next level and conquer the World Wide Web? We all know that an Internet presence has become a crucial component of any professional business and essentially, it's your 24 hour, 7 days-a-week marketing workhorse. How many times have you declined doing business with a company simply because you couldn't find more information about it on the Internet? Chances are your competition has a website promoting their business and if you ever want to have a chance at growing your agency or your name as an independent counselor, **YOU NEED A WEBSITE**. Luckily, I am here to guide you through the process using a layman's format so you can easily get up and running.

FIRST THINGS FIRST....

One of the most important parts of your webpage... isn't even your webpage! It's your **Domain Name**, web address or simply: *www.HOW-CAN-THEY-FIND-YOU.com!*

IMPORTANT TIP: Make sure the address you choose is as easy to read and type as possible. Also, try to avoid hyphens unless absolutely necessary.

- 1) Visit www.godaddy.com or do a search for "Domain registration".
- 2) Think of a good web address and type it into the "Find a Domain" box.
- 3) If you are lucky it will be available, if not, you have to keep thinking of names until you find one that's suitable. Yes, this can be a bit of a challenge!

Examples of Good and Bad Web Addresses

GOOD

www.YourSite.com

www.YourCounselingSite.com

www.YourRehabilitationAndCounselingSite.com

The primary objective is to have a web address that will appear in a web search inquiry. If you Google

search: *Your Counseling Site*, then all of these examples would show up first in the search results. This is ideal for what you want to happen during a search for your site.

BAD

www.Your-Site.com

www.Your-CounselingSite.com

www.Your-Counseling-Site.com

While the hyphens make these addresses easier to read, they are not ideal because if you Google search: *Your Counseling Site*, then none of these addresses would appear at the top of the search results. You would have to Google search: *Your-Counseling-Site* (hyphens included) for this to yield first page search results. Most people won't type hyphens while searching and you will miss potential clients!

Once you've managed to find the perfect web domain, it's time to register it. For now, you will probably do just fine getting the minimum package. Choose how long you want to register the site. This could range from one year to five years. **Important: Make sure you re-register your site on time. If you fail to do so, then someone else will be able to take the domain from you!** Upon registration, you will receive one email address, if you require more email addresses then choose the type of package you require.

*All you need at this point is your domain name registered. You do NOT need any webpage hosting services.

Now that you have your domain name it's time to attach it to a website (see Picture 1).

You must not attach the above to an actual website (see Picture 2).

So let's get started on getting the website....

The process of developing websites has been simplified over the years so the average person can have an Internet presence. If you don't have any web design skills, then you should start with a **website template**. This is basically a fully designed website and all you have to do is input your information to customize it to your needs.

- 1) Visit www.WIX.com or do a search for: Web Template Design Hosting
- 2) Sign up for whatever services will fit you.
- 3) Browse through their selection of templates and choose the one that best fits your agency, remember you can change practically everything on the template.

Aside from your domain name, your websites' homepage is equally as important. Think of it as the outside of your actual house. For the passerby, they will form inferences on the quality of the inside of the house based on what they see on the outside. There-

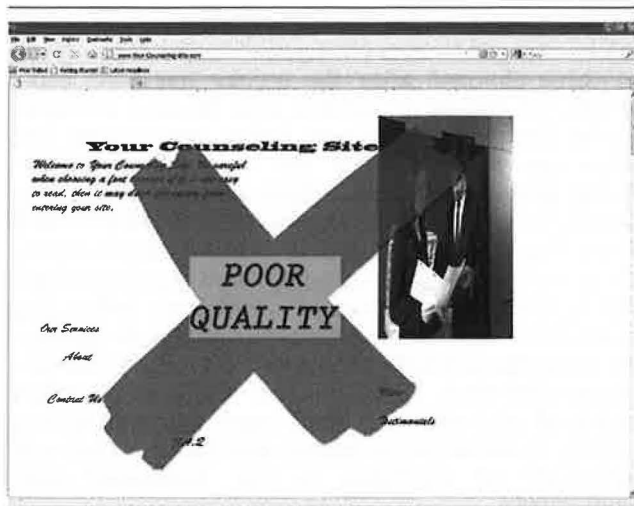
fore, when creating a homepage for your website, it is imperative that you engage the viewer enough to get them to view the rest of the websites' content. The following pictures are of a poorly designed homepage and a better one.

The above homepage contains: Poor font style choice, wrong font size, bad spacing, also an off-subject and poor quality image.

This homepage has better spacing and an easily legible font size and style. The picture is relative to the



Picture 2. Once the schematic is completed, you may begin developing your website. As shown, the website obviously will be blank offering both an opportunity and challenge

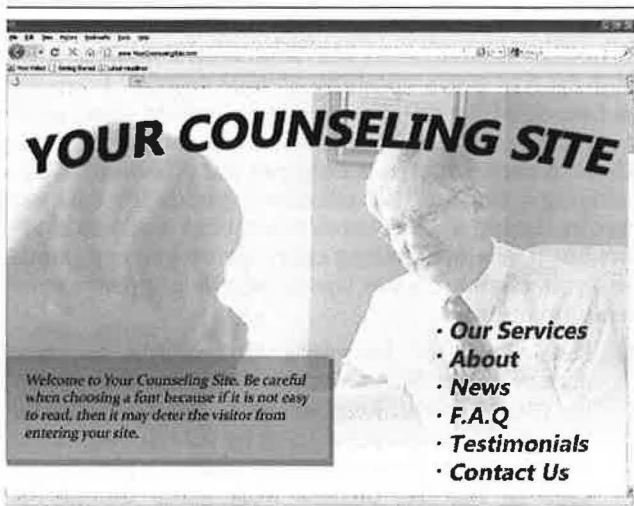


Picture 3. This homepage contains: Poor font style choice, wrong font size, bad spacing, also an off-subject and poor quality image. Illegible content will ultimately deter visitors from your website.

websites subject and is properly incorporated into the homepage design scheme.

When designing your homepage, make sure it is not too cluttered with information and everything is neatly organized so that the web user can easily navigate to the pages they inquire about. Be sure to use font sizes correctly. Take a look at other related websites if you need any ideas on what to do.

- 1) Color Scheme – Pick colors that complement each other just remember that you want to maintain a



Picture 4. This homepage has better spacing and an easily legible font size and style. The picture is relative to the website's subject and is properly incorporated into the homepage design scheme. This homepage is more welcoming to visitors.

professional image therefore choosing extreme color pairs may turn off the site visitor. If you have trouble choosing colors then use light blue, white, and black text. The color scheme you choose will be used for the majority of the site and will be associated with the color scheme of your agency so choose wisely.

- 2) Text and Font – Most often, black text is the most common color. There are times when you may want to change to a lighter color if the background you are using is too dark. Just be sure that the user can easily read the text. Try to keep all text uniform throughout to entire website. Font sizes may vary so use your judgment but keep in mind that all your visitors are different and have varying visual acuities. If a visitor cannot read the information on your site then he/she will leave.
- 3) Pictures – when applicable, use your own pictures. This gives your site a more personal feel and the visitor will notice it. Counseling is very personal practice, so the idea is to translate a feeling of a personable, professional agency on your website. Only use stock images when no other options are available and only use the highest quality images available.

Some of the other pages your site should contain:

- Services page– Here you want to include all of the services that you provide. You don't have to go into great details but on average, most web visitors use the Internet to gain as much knowledge about a subject as possible so it would be in your best interest to provide them with as much information as possible about your services.
- Company Info page – Visitors want to get acquainted your agency as much as possible before making a decision to do business with you. Your website is a representation of you and your partners. Use this page to provide background information about your company. Be sure to promote your agency's strengths. If the agency is new, then promote you and/or your partners' experience. So instead of saying that your newly formed agency is six months old, say that your agency has over 15 years of combined experience.
- Contact page – Obviously this is an extremely important page to include on your site. Would you give out a business card that has no contact information? Of course you wouldn't. On this page be sure to include all relevant and professional ways to get in contact with your agency. Include your hours of operation and an address if applicable. If the template allows, include a map showing the location of your office.
- Biography page (optional) – I would recommend this page because again, you want the visitor to feel comfortable with your agency and know who

they may potentially be dealing with. Here you want to include a professional photograph of you, your partners and a summary of accomplishments and accolades.

- News page (optional) – Placing current news articles related to your agencies field of service is a good way to attract more viewers. Make your site a source for a wealth of information other than just the services you provide. Also, putting lots of relevant and related news on your site allows people searching for those other subjects to stop by your site. These people may refer others to your site as well.
- Testimonial page (optional) – Use a testimonial page to further attract clients. Visitors want to know other client experiences when dealing with your company. Sometimes a visitor may make a decision to use your services strictly based upon testimony. Make sure you get approval from the clients you use for testimony.
- F.A.Q. (optional) – The frequently asked questions page is a good opportunity to answer questions that a visitor may have while perusing your site. The objective here is to clear up as many questions as possible before the visitor has to contact you for further information.

Once you are satisfied with your website connect your domain to your website and publish the website.

Cost Comparision: Do It Yourself vs. Getting A Professional

Have you ever hired a professional to repair something and after he fixes the problem and charges you a fortune, you realize that you could have done the repair yourself? With web design, you should try to get as much of the legwork done on your own; it won't cost you any more money to change a color that you dislike or a template that doesn't appeal to your websites' subject matter. In fact, not only will you discover what works and what doesn't, you will also be learning a new skill. If months later you need to make updates to your site, you can easily do so without needing to wait on someone to assist you. Even if you get stuck while creating a site and you decide to get a pro, you will save a substantial amount of money because of the work you already put into the site. Cost: \$0-\$500.

Consider an amateur before you consider a pro, find a techie-in-training. Post a flyer or advertisement at a local college or on Craigslist stating what you require and how much you are willing to pay. Going this route will save you lots of money and with the right amateur, you will get what you need to get up and running. Estimated Cost: \$100-\$1000 (Depends on agreed upon price.)

Want to go pro? While you may get what you want you will be charged for everything you receive. If you want anything changed after the service has been completed, you will be charged as well. Be sure to obtain quotes from numerous pros before you commit because the prices charged will vary greatly. Some charge hourly rates while others set prices for the entire job. I suggest finding someone that is independent and will quote you a price that includes the total completion of your site. Total completion should include you approving the design as satisfactory before the completion of payment. It is not uncommon for designers to charge you half of the total cost before even beginning the work. Make sure you communicate what you need and what you don't need, many designers will try to entice you to add on site features that will ultimately be worthless to you. Estimated cost: \$500-\$7000.

Improving Your Presence on the Web

Now that you have a website online and working for you, the next thing you will want to start doing is improving the chances of your website being viewed. One surefire way to do this is to advertise your site to everyone and in turn they will physically type in the address of your website and view it. Unfortunately, you probably don't have the resources to reach out to every potential client in the universe so here's where **S.E.O.** comes in.

S.E.O. stands for Search Engine Optimization. Put simply, this means improving the chances that your website will show up if a web surfer types in something related to your services into a search engine. For example, if I type in a search for Degenerative Disc Disease, it would yield multiple results containing information about the subject. Well what if dealing with that disease was a specialty of your agency? It would be beneficial for you if your website would show up if someone were to type the disease into a search engine. That's where S.E.O. can help you out. The skill of developing a website that effectively yields the optimal results during a web search takes time and lots of effort but it is worth getting every visitor you can possibly grab. Here are a few tips to help you improve your search results.

- 1) Use plenty of keywords that relate to your agency's field. When you are filling in information for your website, keep in mind that the wording you use is the material used by search engines to find matches. Even when you upload a picture, be sure to tag the picture with some thoughtful keywords that pertain to a possible search word.
- 2) Find other sites that you could link your site to perhaps a counseling directory website. Try to find as many relevant sites willing to post a link to

your website on their page. This greatly increases the chances your website appears in searches.

- 3) Post articles and terminologies whenever feasible because you want to make your webpage the go to source for information. Posting informative videos on YouTube is another great way of gaining visitors searching for services and solutions.

Now that your site is up and run-ning, let's look at the future of the Internet and the counseling professional as well as the ethics concerning your counseling website.

Internet Counseling and Ethics

A new wave of **Distance Therapy** has emerged over the past few years thanks to the myriad of technological advances of digital communication. Distance therapy, also known as phone therapy or Internet therapy, has evolved over the years as the therapeutic world has embraced the digital age. Some therapists offer different forms of distance therapy in an effort to reach a wider range of people in various locations and across distances. As the names imply, phone therapy and online therapy do not use in-person, face-to-face communication as the primary mode of therapy. (N.A., 2014)

Email. This is the most common form of Internet counseling. This allows the counselor and the patient to communicate at their own pace. It allows ample time for reading, thinking and responding during sessions. This is especially good for people who enjoy articulating how they feel through writing. Also people with busy schedules are able to continue the session at their convenience. (Ainsworth, 2001)

Chat. Live, real-time chat offers a good way of communicating with a patient when there is a need for quick responses. One problem with a live chat is that the users' ability to type has a very important impact of the quality of the session as well as the hourly charges that may accrue due to a slow typist. (Ainsworth, 2001)

Videoconferencing. This will be the future of Distance Counseling. Unlike the other methods listed above, videoconferencing allows both counselor and patient the ability to see faces, movements and actions that are beneficial in gaining a better understanding of each other while communicating during a session. While not as good as an actual, in-person session, this offers the best alternative. One of the downsides to using this technology is that both the counselor and the patient will need the videoconferencing capability in order to get the most out of the session. However, some patients may feel more comfortable not being seen and in that case you can setup the session in a manner that only the counselor can be viewed. Here is a quick way to get in on this technology. (Ainsworth, 2001)

- 1) Purchase a high quality web camera. You can find these in any electronics store. Or you can purchase a smart phone capable of videoconferencing.
- 2) Join Skype, a phone over Internet service. Once you join you receive a phone number where you can be contacted. Within Skype, there's a video conferencing option so when a client calls they will be able to connect via video conference.
- 3) Consider the cost of a videoconferencing call before adapting the technology as this could get costly.

While this method can be beneficial for all parties involved, it is imperative that the all individuals fully understand all of the problems that may arise while practicing Distance Counseling.

- 1) As a general guideline, all ethics that are practiced outside of the Internet are also utilized while conducting counseling over the Internet. When creating your website, it is imperative to make sure you adhere to your normal code of ethics.
- 2) Your webpage serves as a primary communication tool. While this is beneficial to your practice, you have to be aware of potential communication errors while you are counseling online. Practice your counseling skills on a peer and get feedback on your performance. Be wary that visual cues, such as heavy breathing, nervousness, and trembling among other characteristics may be missed while conducting a session. Voice intonations may also differ or be non-existent. Make yourself aware that this could hinder your ability to deliver an accurate depiction of your patient. Have other counselors read your webpage and critique the clarity of the content.
- 3) While the Internet may be widely available to many people, not every patient will be capable of using the technology on the same level in which you utilize it. Ask yourself as well as clients if they are functionally and linguistically able to use the applications necessary to successfully perform a session.
- 4) Take the time to guide your client through the process of obtaining any pertinent applications needed to conduct and technology-assisted services.
- 5) Do not release any personal information about any client whether it is a picture or a testimony on your website without informed consent. Be absolutely positive that you completely inform the client on all technology that will be used during the counseling process and thereafter.
- 6) All counselors must ensure that they maintain the complete confidentiality of all electronic information processed over the Internet. Inform the client of the importance of closing out all applica-

- tions used during the session. Use a password to protect any personal information. Make sure that all parties involved have been logged out of any programs used. Failure to do so could leave sensitive documents available to other users such as colleagues or family members.
- 7) It is your duty to take precautions to ensure the confidentiality of information transmitted through the use of computers, email, facsimile machines, telephones, voicemail, answering machines, and other technology. Make efforts to use encryption whenever possible. When encryption techniques are not feasible, make sure that you notify the client of the inability to use such technology and the hazards surrounding the inability to do so. When there is an issue of security, limit all communication to general conversation using non-descript identifiers. One major problem of online communication is the difficulty of verifying the identity of the client or the client being unable to verify you. Make sure you address any imposter concerns. Establish code words, numbers, graphics or other non-descript identifiers as a verification method. If you are using technology-assisted test interpretations, follow the same ethical standards regardless of method of administration. Make sure all parties involved are aware of these standards. If you take part in electronic consultation groups such as any social networks, list servers, blogs, online courses, supervision, and interdisciplinary teams, limit disclosure of confidential information and continue to follow the ethical norms. Be aware that electronic messages are considered to be part of the clients' records. All electronic records are preserved, so you must inform clients of the retention method and period. Also reveal who has access to the records and how the records are destroyed.
 - 8) Get consent from you client before performing any electronic recording sessions. You must also obtain permission when viewing any previous transcripts or recordings of sessions with other supervisors, faculty, peers or others within the training environment.
 - 9) Make an effort to remain updated on changes in legal and ethical code pertaining to your online services to ensure that you avoid all violations. Seek assistance whenever you feel that there may be a gray area. Always provide your clients an alternate contact method in case the technology you are currently using fails. Also, provide your client with the contact information of a local agency or counselor-on-call for the purpose of crisis intervention.
 - 10) Be sure to include information on your website that contains applicable certification boards and/or licensure bodies to facilitate client rights and protection and to address ethical concerns.
 - 11) Be sure to provide information about each counselor participating in your online agency (e.g., ethnicity, gender) as would be available if the counseling were to take place face-to-face.
 - 12) Obtain the written consent of any legal guardians or other authorized legal representatives prior to rendering services in the event clients are minor children, adults who are legally incompetent, or adults incapable of giving informed consent.
 - 13) Be aware of time zone differences, local customs, and cultural or language differences that might impact service delivery.
- Following the rules above will ensure that all counselors involved in an Internet-based counseling format will provide an ethically sound service.

Conclusion

It is your duty as a counselor to arm yourself with as much knowledge possible on how to improve your services to your clients. The Internet allows you to reach people in places that you would have never reached otherwise. It also allows you to grow your business and gain a greater territory that is impossible to achieve without the Internet. Implementing a website allows you to have a second office via the worldwide web.

Make sure you adhere to the rules and guidelines while maintaining any online presence and keep yourself updated on any ethical changes pertaining to your field.

References

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Editor's Note: The present article was solicited as an opportunity to educate the IARP membership about developing a website. It is a goal that 2-3 articles per year will address the "technology" side of the rehabilitation profession. Hopefully, future articles will address email communication, social networking, alongside other technology issues. Views and opinions in the present article are based on the viewpoint of a website designer, not as a rehabilitation profes-

sional. Mr. Ceaser is a website developer, not a professional in the field of vocational rehabilitation, forensic economics, or nurse case management. The IARP member and others reading the present article would be encouraged to consult their own code of ethics and research current happenings in their field, when developing a personalized website.