

Why do you want to be on the web and how do you get there?

Congratulations! You've decided to have a web site! Now what do you do? Start by deciding what you want your web site to do for you. If you want to attract new clients, be clear about who your ideal client is and speak to them in your text and visuals. Do you like to help young couples, trauma victims or mid-life women? What are your areas of expertise? Avoid claiming to be an expert in everything. Would you select a physician who claims to specialize in pediatrics, geriatrics, dermatology and oncology?

A web site can also be used to reach out to other professionals for referrals. Consider including text directed to lawyers, physicians, and others who may send you clients. If you have referral relationships with others, consider asking them to include links from their sites to yours, as a service to their clients, and to help your site be found by search engines like Google.

A web site can also make your practice run more efficiently. Without an administrative staff, a potential client's first contact will usually be with your voice mail. If a prospective client has made the decision to seek help – they may just go to the next name in the phone book rather than leave a voice message with a stranger. With a web site, your information is always available even if you are not. A site can also reduce time spent on the telephone repeatedly giving directions, payment, insurance, and location information. Savings will also result from lower printing and mailing expenses when your forms and documents are available online. If you charge \$125 per session and your web site saves just 30 minutes a week – could schedule two additional client appointments a month – generating more than \$3000 in additional income each year.

Next, select a designer. If you need a mechanic for your car, you would consider things like qualifications, experience, location, fees, what happens if you're not satisfied with the work? Interviewing a web designer is much the same.

Start by considering what type of relationship you want with your designer. Do you want to work with just one person who will be responsible from start to finish? With larger web design firms, your relationship may be with a sales person or customer service representative instead of the designer. Be sure to ask if your site will be developed from a template that the designer offers to other clients. Costs can be reduced by using a template, but you risk having another provider in your area with a nearly identical site.

If you need business cards, brochures, letterhead or print ads as well as a web site, consider finding a designer who can do it all. This will save time and money and help you develop a cohesive business brand. Be clear about who owns the designs. If your web site designer develops a logo and selects photographs for the site, are you free to use them in your other marketing materials?

Be sure that you understand what your contract

includes. What if you don't like the initial design? You need to be sure the designer will work with you until you are happy with the site. Revisions are part of the development process. Discuss in advance how the designer will work with you during the editing process. Most communication is by email while you provide and edit text — but if you want to meet by telephone, when will your designer be available? Web sites remain a work in progress. Over time you will want to update and refresh your site. Be

sure that you know how changes will be billed after the initial site is completed.

Securing a domain name can be the hardest part of developing a web site. Even if you have registered your business name with the state, that does not secure the name for your web site. Consider using a location in your site name, such as www.rockvillepsychologist.com. If you are well established in the community, your name might be the answer: www.JoshuaMCohenPhD.com. If you have established a relationship with a web designer, he or she should assist you in securing your domain name. Try to keep your domain name as simple as possible — hyphens can be used if necessary. In the end, make sure the name will fit on your business cards. In general, I recommend names with a .com extension. The extension .org was originally intended for, but is not restricted to, non-profit organizations. If you don't have a designer, you can secure the name yourself, but make sure that the name can be transferred to the web hosting company your designer uses.

Annual domain registration and hosting fees are generally billed separately from design work. Be clear about who is responsible for paying your annual domain registration, and make sure you don't let the registration lapse. Buying lapsed domain names is a cottage industry on the web and someone else could easily grab your domain name and then offer to sell it back to you. Does that sound like extortion to you? It does to me.

This site will be the face of your business on the internet... be sure the designer will work with you until you are happy with the site.

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You should also make sure you know who will be hosting your site. Hosting can be very cheap, but you get what you pay for. *One price for lifetime hosting* isn't a bargain if the company goes out of business and your site is lost. Will your designer deal with the hosting company, or will you be the one calling tech support when something goes wrong? Will the hosting company provide you with email accounts using your domain name? An email address such as DrJ@SuburbanPsychology.com is much more professional than JohnL4567@hotmail.com. You should ask in advance if your designer will set up these email accounts for you.

There are generally three ways that visitors will find your site. Most directly, visitors can type your internet address such as www.SuburbanPsychology.com into the address bar in the browser. More commonly, they will use a search engine like Google. It's useful to understand how search engines work. Most search engines today are "crawler based" which means that the entire web is scanned or "crawled" regularly to look for new or changed listings. Using a mysterious and secret algorithm, pages are ranked based on page titles, descriptions, body copy, formatting, and other elements. These crawlers also follow the links they find within web sites. Visitors may also find your site via links from other sites or listings.

Ask what your designer will do to optimize your site for search engines. While the crawlers will eventually visit your site, it should be submitted to the most common search engines to speed the process. Each page should include a page title which is the text that appears at the very

top of the internet window; a page description, which is the text that is displayed in the search results; and keywords. Keywords are not as important as they once were, but they can't hurt. The keywords should be words pulled from the actual page. Packing the keyword tags with random words will not assist in search results and may actually hurt your search placement.

Even with your own site, **continue with any free listing services** – particularly if they include a link to your site. Your site's search engine ranking improves as the crawlers find and follow these inbound links.

Once your site is found, make sure that there is value for the visitor. What services can you share to attract and keep site visitors? Links to articles you have written, or links to other sites demonstrate your commitment to serving your clients while helping search engines find your site.

Ask your designer who is responsible for selecting and obtaining the rights to any photographs that are used. Model releases are needed for any photographs of people used on your site. Assume that all photographs and materials on the web are copyright protected. It's important that you respect the copyrights of others, as you expect others to respect yours.

So now you're ready to start. Do your homework. Look at other psychologists' sites. Think about a color scheme. Begin writing the copy for your individual pages. Get an attractive, approachable digital photograph of yourself. **Relax; it's going to be fun!**

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