How to put yourself out there

Web-savvy psychologists share the strategies they use to strengthen their Web presence and help patients get the services they need.

By Amy Novotney

A growing number of consumers are finding their health information and checking out their health-care professionals online — and this will only increase as technology and people's comfort in using it increases.

"For most of my younger clients especially, knowing they can learn something about me before they come in is reassuring to them," says Ann Becker-Schutte, PhD, a private practitioner in Kansas City, Missouri.

Even when clients find out about you through a referral, one of the first things they do is check out your website, says Dan Hinmon, community director of the Mayo Clinic Social Media Network. "It's important for providers to make sure their site looks professional, that all information is current and that it includes the information clients are looking for," Hinmon says. "Put yourself in the place of your client and ask, 'What would I really want to know about this psychologist before I make an appointment?' and make sure that question is answered on your home page."

So how do you develop your professional identity online so clients can find you? Here's advice from psychology's experts:

Observe and follow others. First, identify the websites, blogs and social media you admire, says Keely Kolmes, PsyD, a San Francisco-based clinical psychologist who has maintained an active professional website and blog since 2008. Figure out whom you want to emulate, be it other psychologists or psychological or mental health organizations such as APA. Watch out for the "bad examples," including those who may post possible diagnoses for celebrities, quote their clients or otherwise compromise client confidentiality, she notes.

Build your content. Start educating your public by adding a blog to your website, advises Becker-Schutte. Spend a half hour a week writing a post about new research related to your specialty or about a typical problem you help clients work through in your practice. "If you can blog about what you're already saying 50 times a week in session, it establishes your expertise and gives you content to share on social media," she says. To stay in compliance with APA's Ethics Code, however, it's important that you never put client information out there in any way, she adds.

Don't be intimidated by blog platforms, she says. Many are

user-friendly, even for psychologists without Web experience. "If you can use Microsoft Word, you can use WordPress," she says.

If blogging feels overwhelming, simply share the posts of like-minded groups, such as APA or the Mayo Clinic, Becker-Schutte says. "Spend 10 minutes a day checking out what's coming through your screen and share those things that are relevant to your practice," she says. "I probably share five to 10 times more from other people than I share of my own because it keeps me active and engaged without having to develop my own content all the time."

Film yourself. Video can be a great way to help potential clients identify with you and ease any anxiety they may feel about coming in for a session, Kolmes says. "It gives a face and

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voice to a psychologist's website and can help people begin to sense whether they will connect with you," she says.

Nicole Lipkin, PsyD, MBA, owner and executive director of Equilibria Psychological and Consultation Services in Philadelphia, has every clinician who joins her practice film a video that explains his or her therapeutic style. "I really wanted to help clients find the right fit," says Lipkin, who is also CEO and founder of Equilibria Leadership Consulting. "Clients love getting a little taste of each clinician's style and it really helps them feel some ownership in the choice they're making about who they want to get help from."

Create boundaries. Be sure to have a social media policy that spells out potential interactions with clients on the Internet. The policy could point out that you won't follow them on social media to maintain confidentiality, and remind them that if they choose to follow you, that may be visible and public information.

"Review the policy with every new client during their first session, and have them sign it to ensure you are all on the same page," Becker-Schutte says.

For examples of social media policies, visit www.drannbeckerschutte.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Ann-Becker-Schutte-Privacy-Social-Media-Policy.pdf and www.drkkolmes.com/docs/socmed.pdf.

Take charge on ratings sites. While you can't erase a bad review on a website such as Yelp or Healthgrades, you can go to these sites and describe your practice in your own words, says Pauline Wallin, PhD, a Pennsylvania clinical psychologist and one of the founders of The Practice Institute, which provides business and marketing resources for psychologists in private practice. "You can also explain in your profile the ethics code you follow as a psychologist — and the reason you will not respond to any reviews," she says.

Kolmes offers another solution. She has developed a feedback survey to enable clinicians to collect satisfaction data from past clients, which then allows them to post the aggregate results of the survey on their website (http://drkkolmes.com/gettingbetter). This can go a long way toward countering bad reviews, Kolmes says.

Improve your SEO. Search engine optimization, or SEO, refers to the strategies you use to get your website or blog noticed by search engines. One way to make sure your practice pops up during searches is to include key search terms in your website description and page titles. For example, if you want to attract people who type "marriage counseling" into the search box, include that phrase in the description of your website and in page titles, even if you consider yourself a marital therapist rather than a marriage counselor, Wallin says. And be sure to include your town or geographic region in your website description since that allows Google to rank your site as a good match when people search for mental health services in your area.

Also, getting inquiries from other high-ranking sites such as APA's Psychologist Locator or Psychology Today's Therapist Directory helps move you higher in search engine rankings, says Wallin, whose SEO blog provides additional tips on improving your rankings. "The more links there are back to your website, the more that Google thinks you're important."

Get help when you need it. Finally, keep in mind that you don't have go it alone when developing a professional presence online. Decide what you want to do and outsource the rest. Kolmes recommends asking colleagues for referrals for who worked on their sites.

"Knowing when to get consultation on the parts you don't understand can really help you get the most out of your website," she says. ■