

Electronic Representations of your Professional Image: Tips on Creating a Web Presence
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The advent of the Internet has forever changed the way we do just about everything in our society. These changes have permeated our professional and private lives in more ways than is possible to count. I find it difficult to remember what life was like before it was possible to access information with a click of a button, instead of going to the library and sifting through dusty journals and books. Reflecting on these changes as I traverse the path from graduate student to ECP, I realize that I'm faced with a new chapter in the age of electronic and social media: the creation and marketing of a professional image.

Psychologists have many decisions to make during the early parts of their career, regardless of the professional path they take. As I began to think about creating a professional website, I browsed the Internet looking for examples of websites that contained elements I thought matched my desired professional image. Next, came the task of deciding whether to build it myself, use an internet-based resource that would do the work for me, or hire a professional to guide me through the process. Finally came the most difficult part, writing content that would speak directly to those clients I wanted to bring into my clinical practice. This process brought up many questions and concerns, including: Who are the people I want to market to? How do I create an image that is most likely to attract them? How many different sections do I need? Do I write my content in first or third person? What type of images should I use? Although my focus is primarily clinical, in speaking with other ECPs, it seems that these concerns are relevant for many of us. We are seeing a marked increase in employers looking at potential candidates' web presence as part of the hiring process, creating a specific need to only have professional, well-controlled information that is publically available.

In an effort to gain more insight into the creating of ethical, effective web presence, I recently interviewed Jill Olkoski, MA and Andy Benjamin, JD, PhD ABPP, both of whom consider having a web presence as an important component of the marketing process. Jill Olkoski develops websites for small businesses, with a particular emphasis in the mental health fields (<http://aldebaranwebdesign.com/>). Jill holds a Master's degree in clinical psychology, which in combination with a former career in engineering, enables her to produce high quality, client-focused material for the web. Her varied education and experience provide her with a unique perspective on how to effectively communicate about technology to individuals who are not tech-savvy and foster long-term collaborative relationships that bring her website clients new business. Andy Benjamin is an affiliate professor at the University of Washington (UW), where he currently teaches both law and clinical psychology classes. In addition, Dr. Benjamin regularly consults with psychologists on ethics concerns, whether related to therapy, contractual obligations, or electronic media issues. He is also the president-elect for APA's Division 31, and created a program at the UW that trains psychologists in the ethical assessment of high-conflict parenting evaluations.

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a web presence?

Jill Olkoski: There are no disadvantages in having a website. In fact, as phone books become more obsolete, people are using the Internet as their primary research source. If your business, including a therapy business, doesn't have its own website, people who are searching for your services will find your competition, instead of you. Even if you have a listing in *Psychology Today*, or another similar directory, it doesn't have nearly the impact and comprehensive information that your own website does. The only disadvantage I can think of is that you need to be willing and able to respond to emails in a timely manner. Not all people want to use the phone, so you must be willing to respond to emails if you have a website. Having a website does mean more work for you, but it does mean greater connections with your clients.

The advantages are enormous - your site is your electronic presence, your representation of who you are and what you do. Many folks won't hire a therapist or make a call unless they can read information about their practice. A website for most therapists costs between \$500 and \$2000, so even if the website gets you ONE new client, it's paid for itself - an excellent return on investment. Websites only cost \$10 a month to keep running. There is no reason a therapist can't afford to have their own website, unless they are completely techno-phobic and won't read emails.

Andy Benjamin: For the generation I work with (the millennial generation), it is clear that a higher degree of expectation about easily finding information about me exists. People want to be able to look at the web and quickly understand what services I provide. I find the major disadvantage is the implicit expectation that I will respond immediately. I feel a little pressure to meet this expectation, which I regulate by ensuring I'm respond to folks in a timely manner. I review a lot of information electronically every day, and it can end up taking a lot of time.

2. If you choose to have a web presence, what are the must have elements?

Jill Olkoski: You must have four basic pages: Home, About, Service Description, Contact. These are the minimum; many therapists have many more pages that detail different services talk about appointments and fees, offer forms for downloading, or directions. You must have an email address that's based on the website domain, not on your personal email (do not use Gmail®, or AOL® or Comcast® or Yahoo®, etc....use an email address based on the website name). On your contact page, you must have both email address and an online contact form.

Andy Benjamin: Having an email account is an absolute must; however, your disclosure agreement should have explicit language about you not being readily available by email and the limits to confidentiality. I believe Linked In® is a must for any person in the professional services. Facebook® and Twitter® are much more relaxed, but have their uses for allowing colleagues to connect with you. If you use a variety of social media, connect them together and ensure your content is consistent. If I was an ECP, I would consider a website an absolute necessity. I would also write a blog that had relevant, high

quality information about my practice area(s) at least once a week. The blog should not exceed two paragraphs in length. You should also insert into each blog at least one URL to another article or blog. The more you interconnect with other authors and blogs, the higher your rankings for search engines, and the easier you are to find.

3. Common mistakes/errors/problems

Jill Olkoski: They do it themselves using a website builder tool, or they have a friend/relative do it for free. Professionals need to make sure the person they hire is familiar with how to build websites according to Google's quality guidelines, and that they understand how search engines work. Make whoever you hire prove this to you with websites they've done before. Talk to other people who have had their websites for over a year, ask for references. People are often happy when they finish a site, but the real proof of performance is when they are still happy a year later. I hear sad stories from people who have had website developers abandon them, so talking to long-term clients is very important. People should also have a basic understanding of how search engines work. For example, search engines read text, not see pictures. So if you want your website to be listed in the search results for "PTSD Philadelphia" then that word had better appear frequently. It's all about the text, the words you use. Learn how search engines work, and then write your content accordingly. You'll be more repetitive than you would in writing normally.

Andy Benjamin: If you do use these electronic media outlets, you must update the information. You should update or modify something at least once a week, such as posting helpful updates on Linked In, or writing blog articles. I have seen people choose topics for their blogs that are not relevant, or reflect poorly on their professional demeanor, and that makes a difference. You should choose something that is highly visible for your particular field, not something abstract or irrelevant. I also see people not creating a professional persona, which I think is a significant mistake. Consumers of any service expect you to have one, whether they are clients or other professionals. I don't post anything personal, it is too easily misinterpreted and found. For this reason, I recommend that people only use social media for professional connections, and not have a personal Facebook or Twitter account. Finally, anything written should be written in a pithy manner, and with good grammar. It seems pretty basic, but I see really good content written so poorly that readers become distracted. As a final note, I tell my students to "make your point and stop," as it is so easy to say too much and lose the reader.

4. Is it possible to make your publications available on your own web page?

Andy Benjamin: It depends on the publisher, but be forceful. You need to make sure you review your contract, and strike out (and initial) any aspect of the contract that would prevent you from reprinting your article on your own website. I also recommend using Academia.edu, as it allows you to easily upload papers and create a professional profile that is readily accessible by the public. However, when considering what papers to upload, you should only use the papers that really will draw the market with whom you want to work.

5. What kind of personal information should and should not be included on a webpage?

Jill Olkoski: This will depend on the theoretical orientation of the therapist. Psychoanalytic folks discuss very little, where as other orientations discuss more. For a therapist, I think personal disclosure should be in the service of the client. Your website is about helping them decide to hire you, so provide them with what they need to know to make that decision. Remember, what you put on a website lives forever, even if the site is taken down. You should always put your picture there, and this is a major sticking point for many therapists. People want to know what you look like, even if you don't like having your picture taken.

Andy Benjamin: I've heard people say no pictures, but I think we are a visual culture, and that it's really important for people to be able to see you. I do not think any other personal information should be available that is not directly related to people contacting you for professional roles. People should be able to find information relevant to their concerns, such as services that can be rendered, or a CV.

In a time where so many people are competing for employment or to make a living, establishing a web presence that is most likely to facilitate those goals is critical. I would like to thank Jill Olkoski and Andy Benjamin for their insights into these issues, as well as the time and energy they put into discussing their thoughts with me. As a final note, it is important to remember that a website is only one small part of the marketing process. It is critical to create your professional image and write high quality content before putting together any form of web content. Websites should speak directly to the clients or employment opportunities you want to have; therefore, it is crucial that you know what/who they are before you begin the process of putting yourself on the Internet.

Resources:

Websites:

APA Career Development: <http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/index.aspx>

APA Practice Organization: <http://www.apapracticecentral.org/>

Jill Olkoski's Blog: <http://aldebaranwebdesign.com/blog/>

Mike Langlois', LICSW Website: <http://gamertherapist.com/blog>

<http://Academia.edu>

<http://Linkedin.com>

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