

Getting More Patients From the Web, Part One

Brian Carter, MSCi, LAc

Can You Really Get Patients Online?

These days, I get two to four new patients a week from the Web; my wife, also an acupuncturist, gets three to four a month. Al Stone, founder of Acupuncture.com and current webmaster of Gancao.net, reports that about half of his business comes from the Web.

Juliette Aiyana, a columnist on PulseMed, wrote me the following message in January:

I loved your *Acupuncture Today* article about taking over the Web. I get so many referrals from my web presence on the Pulse. For example, this week a man came to me with IBS whose mother lives in Georgia and reads the Pulse and referred him to me. Wow! Talk about national domination! I'm glad it gives me the chance to help more people - they call me from California, Connecticut, even England for dietary advice, info, etc. It has been wonderful and I really want to thank you for creating the vehicle.

Stay the course and Happy New Year to you and yours,

Juliette

Yes, you can get patients online. I'll tell you what I've learned about how to do it. Let's start by looking at what many acupuncturists choose instead of creating their own Web sites: online acupuncture directories.

Are Acupuncture Directories Worth the Money?

If an acupuncture directory gets some of your good marketing dollars, you should get patients in return.

The goal of any marketing effort is to at least earn back the cost. It's all right if you just break even, because your services (if they're good) will generate referrals later on. But no matter what strategy you try - newspaper ads, Yellow Pages ads, health fairs or online acupuncture directories - start by determining how many new patients it must deliver to break even.

Determine your break-even point by figuring out the lifetime profit of your average patient. Let's be conservative, forgetting their return visits over a number of years, and estimate that your average patient, after rent and supplies, nets you \$500 in two months. In the table below, you'll see that \$500 is almost enough to join every major acupuncturist directory for one year.

You should be able to break even with online acupuncturist directories, as long as they can get you at

least one patient - but this article's inspiration was a report that shed doubt on that. My wife thought about getting listed on a particular directory, which will remain anonymous, so she e-mailed five acupuncturists on the directory and asked them what kind of results they'd gotten. They each had been listed for between three months and one year, and *not one of them had gotten a single patient from the listing*.

After reviewing the Web site, I was not surprised - they weren't getting much traffic. After reviewing five sites, I began to wonder if these online acupuncture directories haven't thought any further than:

1. putting up a Web site;
2. writing some copy to sell acupuncturists on getting a listing;
3. charging acupuncturists money, listing their names and some other details about them; and
4. sitting back and raking in the dough (with an emphasis on the "sitting back" part).

What happened to "getting prospective patients to their Web site"? That should be the directories' number one goal - that's their service to you. They should be a loud local voice for your services. If they were, they'd get you the kind of results I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Who cares how nice their directory looks or how well they describe your practice if no prospects from your area ever see the site?

Are these directories content to take your money, list your practice, and leave it at that? Let's give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they don't intend to sell you a worthless service, that they want you to get results. Then perhaps they are suffering from that common misconception: Just build it and they will come. *It doesn't work that way online*. I explained why in my last articles, "Claiming the Web for Acupuncture," parts one and two, in the January and February issues.

Maybe this hasn't dawned on many acupuncturists because they're not Web-savvy. Do you assume that if an acupuncture directory is online, your prospects can find it and they will go to it? The traffic results below demonstrate that not all directories are getting a lot of traffic. What's more, you can find out what people actually search for online (if you keep reading this article). If you type those items in, do the acupuncture directories come up on the first page? No. So, how will your prospects find you if you're on a directory that can't be found?

You want prospects from your city, but the Web is international, so either the directory must pull in prospects only from your area, or it must get huge numbers of people from all over the place, then direct them to specific cities. If you want patients to find you, then get your information on a Web directory with lots of traffic.

So, when considering a directory, ask: How much traffic does your site get per month? How many of your visitors go to a page of acupuncturists from my city? What results do your customers usually get?

Alexa.com tells you how popular a Web site is. That information, plus costs and results, are shown in the comparison table below.

Acupuncturist Directory	Alexa.com Traffic Ranking	Cost for Listing	Average Results to You	Rank for Search on "Find Acupuncturist"
AcupunctureToday.com	184,886	\$99.95/1 yr.	not stated	-

PulseMed.org	232,844	\$95/1 yr.	1-16 patients per month	#7, #15
MedicalAcupuncture.org	348,429	Only lists MDs, DO, DCs	Not stated	#1
AcuFinder.com	488,125	\$199/1 yr.	not stated	#4, #8
GanCao.net	519,863	Free (have to write a case history or be a member of a professional organization)	not stated	-
Qpuncture.com	776,651	Free	not stated	-
AcupunctureBySpecialty.com	1,554,804	\$250/1 yr.	not stated	#5
AmericanAcupuncture.com	3,966,460	\$50/1 yr.	not stated	-

What Are Your Prospects Searching For?

Are people going online to find acupuncturists directly? If they're not, how are these acupuncture directories going to succeed? When I thought about how to best set up an acupuncturist directory on PulseMed, this was my first question. I looked at what people actually search for online.

Overture.com, a global leader in commercial search services on the Internet, gets 1,026 searches a month that include the word acupuncturist, but only 67 for find an acupuncturist - not very many, considering there are 131 million Internet users in the U.S. If we expand our search to acupuncture also, we get acupuncture Los Angeles, acupuncture Chicago, acupuncture San Francisco, etc. Many of the major cities have keywords like this, and you can use them in your Web pages to attract targeted prospects.

But, how would your prospects find you in a city that doesn't have a keyword - for example, Seattle? (This may be an indicator that the Web may not be the strongest advertising tool for acupuncture in Seattle, but it's not a dead end) Get clever; look at what people search for in relationship to Seattle. The most relevant results are Seattle massage and Seattle physician, so create a Web page that does well for those keywords, and write about how the topic relates to what you do as an acupuncturist. For example, talk about massage in Seattle, how acupuncture is based on acupuncture, how much more effective acupuncture is, what it can treat - and by the way, did you know I'm an acupuncturist, and here's my contact information in case you're interested.

That's how you connect people's needs with how you can benefit them.

APRIL 2004