Consolidating a Hospital's Brand Presence on the Web

by Ted Balowski

Having an effective Web presence is critically important for a hospital or healthcare organization, but how should that presence appear for a brand with more than one location? Is it a good idea for a brand with multiple locations or offerings to consolidate efforts?

In the past decade, there have been profound changes in the way the hospital industry organizes itself, making it more important than ever to have a strong brand presence. With multiple brands and locations, establishing and maintaining a successful Web effort can be difficult to manage. A single brand presence can build a larger audience by bringing current and potential patients to a single location for all information and transactions.

Consolidating multiple online identities

Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin health network discovered its multiple online identities were not effectively communicating the network's services to consumers. The multiple sites were not conveying all of the benefits of coordinated care among its two community hospitals, more than 30 health centers, and academic medical center.

For usability and manageability, the best way forward lay in consolidating websites and multiple URLs to create one branded community under a single URL, with dedicated landing pages for specific services.

"Our decision to pursue a single website coincided with what was happening in our market and with our position in the market. We were aligning healthcare delivery in our region and providing coordinated care in the community setting and at the academic medical center. But the multiple websites didn't necessarily make that clear," says Chris Sadler, Director of Creative Services and Digital Communications.

Challenges and obstacles faced

At the time the digital team initiated the website consolidation project, the system was positioned as two distinct brands in the marketplace: an academic and a community brand. The system also contained two different physician groups.

As operational efficiencies were put in place, the digital team also sought to provide a seamless online experience. But the timing was not necessarily parallel. The digital team sought to approach the initiative in phases to continue to move the online presence forward while planning for the evolution of the healthcare system. The team also needed to work with service-line leaders and physicians who were accustomed to individual identities.

"We met often with our service-line leaders, executive committees, and others to let them know that we were moving to this one website strategy. And we had two things going for us that helped to ease the transition. One, the organization as a whole was moving in that direction, so the Web alignment made sense. Two, we had data from focus groups and surveys that showed that the customers in our service area increasingly view us as one integrated network, and that they expect their Web experience to reflect that," says Kathi Perlewitz, Vice President, Marketing and Communications.

Even after the organization made the decision to leverage a single brand in the marketplace, the primary challenge was to help locations maintain a somewhat unique identity through subpages, but still stay consistent under one consolidated brand.

In addition to their primary conceptual challenge, the team also faced several implementation challenges. The team was migrating content from several different websites and several different content management platforms. Each platform handled images, documents, URLs, and data fields in a different way. Getting content out of the old systems and successfully into the new platform was a challenge. Several of the old systems also posed technology restrictions that led to unoptimized site structure, URLs, title tags, and H1s. To take full advantage of SEO best practices, all of these

areas needed to be addressed.

Not only would the team need to ensure everything translated correctly to the new platform, but also that they could maintain their site authority and established organic search rankings even after such drastic overhauls to the website properties.

"We were changing domains, platforms, URL structure, information architecture, design, content, and even hosting—all of which make a migration more complex and pose more risk. We had to focus heavily on SEO improvements to help ensure we could survive the perfect storm of changes," says Katie Adam, Web Project Manager.

A phased approach established

An evaluation of the current websites was conducted, and key issues were identified in the areas of site structure, navigation, page layout, duplicate content, design, and technology. After that evaluation, the digital team—consisting of a project manager, Web editor, digital strategist, and Web developer/analyst—recommended a phased approach to development.

The approach gave the team the ability to address the immediate needs of their organizational growth while planning for an ideal future online presence. In phase one, an initial website consolidation combined Community Memorial Hospital and St. Joseph's Hospital, and their 30-plus health centers and clinics, into one site and onto one content management platform.

However, the system still included another separate website on a different platform for the health network's academic brand. The two websites were visually combined with tabbed navigation for the different locations that linked the two sites together. Phase two of the project was to ultimately consolidate into one website on a single platform.

Design and usability feedback solicited

Before embarking on this phase of the project, the team did Blitz user testing to elicit feedback regarding the design and usability of their two remaining sites. Participants were filtered for

Internet use and healthcare search experience/likelihood and ranged in age from late 20s to early 60s. Two user testing sessions were conducted with a total of 14 participants.

Even though all of the users had some type of previous interaction with the brand, the study showed the brand and business nomenclature often stood in the way of successful online interaction, especially related to the presentation of locations and services. The conclusions:

- Hospital-focused top navigation was confusing to users, was rarely used to navigate the site, and added to design clutter and redundant content issues.

- On average, tasks took more than three clicks to complete, highlighting the importance of simplicity in presentation/organization for successful user interaction.

- Users tended to point out multiple listings of information as redundant and unnecessary, except when used in traditional places like left navigation and in-text links.

- Site functionality that forced a user to make too many selections before receiving content was received negatively.

- Users were normally looking for "quick hit" information, especially phone numbers and physical location/direction information.

"The user testing provided a few aha moments, but it also confirmed some things we thought going into the consolidation," Adam says. "We were envisioning a single site that wasn't siloed so much by location. The user testing helped solidify that vision and gave us a solid foundation for our recommendations."

The user-testing results were presented to leadership and included the following recommendations in the areas of design, navigation, content, and functionality for guidance in the redesign of a single branded website:

- Minimize or remove the presence of hospital locations as global navigation across the site and reduce page duplication.

- Remove additional selection steps before presenting content (e.g., forcing users to select a location in service listings and search results).

- Add physical location indicators to clinic and hospital listings.

- Ensure that content pages are informational and concise through use of bullet points, breaking long pages into several more targeted topics, increasing image and icon use, and adding phone number/location information to all pages.

Final consolidation implemented

The team wanted to make sure the different service lines and locations were aware of and involved in the redesign efforts and the changes taking place. Accordingly, a communication plan was put in place with an opportunity for various groups to review their current content. A work breakdown was created for all marketing associates to share with their service lines—pages were assigned, priorities were outlined, and a how-to document with objectives and instructions was provided. In addition, a communication template was created so a consistent message was being presented to the various service-line and location leaders.

"The move to a single website not only aligned us with where the organization was going, but it also gave us a great opportunity to work closely with our service-line clients to review existing content and put plans in place to build out other content where opportunities existed," says Frank Lococo, Director of Advertising and Marketing.

To ensure content could be carried over to the new platform, with images, documents, and pages resolving to their new structure, the team would need to implement a migration script. The different systems were analyzed and a giant audit of all of the content and current data fields was created. The audit contained over 4,700 line items for pages and 4,545 line items of images and documents. As part of the migration script, all URLs, title tags, meta descriptions, page titles, and H1s were rewritten. Because of this extensive review process and

documentation, the team also had the information necessary to put in place 301 redirects for every single page for the launch of the new site.

Outcomes achieved

Froedtert's redesign effort resulted in a 32-percent increase in organic traffic to the consolidated website. The navigation allows site visitors to find what they want quickly, while becoming aware of the wide scope of services. The new site provides a number of innovative features as well as simplified navigation. The site represents a major step forward for the healthcare system, offering both current and potential users with streamlined access to information at any time.

The change helps consolidate awareness efforts by focusing on a single brand for both the organization and its services. Notable achievements include consolidation of multiple websites into one, contemporary user-centered and responsive design, operational efficiencies achieved from a single content management technology platform, and improved accessibility and site search. The organization completed two overhauls of websites and redesigns in less than two years to get all the sites to one manageable website and URL.

The successful consolidation allowed for easier site management, increased SEO, improved analytics, increased efficiency, and reduced technical effort that resulted in improved marketing strategies. The team saw an average gain of 13 places in keyword rankings five months post-launch.

This was the single largest initiative the digital group has undertaken and it involved an estimated 5,500 Web pages of original content across five different sites. The Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin website now draws about 110,000 unique visitors per month.

Sadler says, "There's a danger that an organization's Web presence can lag behind the evolution of the brand because of the complexities involved with Web development. But with clear direction from senior leaders and an empowered, talented digital team that can inform priorities and tackle thousands of individual tasks, our alignment was pretty good. We're also in place now to tackle what's next since we're on a single platform and the brand is clear."

Recommendations offered

A key piece of advice is to complete a formal evaluation of a website's usability and functionality. Results from usability testing can be used to influence leadership regarding website best practices and highlight the importance of establishing a strong Web presence.

In addition, for any organization contemplating a similar consolidation effort, it's recommended that you:

- Be persistent in what you know is the right path. Provide your expertise with supporting statistics following usability techniques and best practices.

- Make a plan with set goals to achieve and follow that approach. There can be an overwhelming amount of content, so work in stages and complete the project in phases.

- Evaluate the site structure for how information is provided, determining what to keep and reorganize to meet goals and expectations.

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