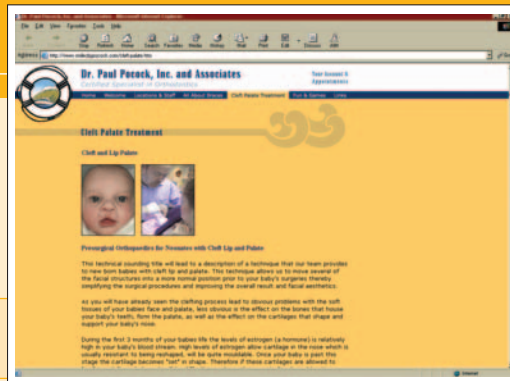


VISUAL BASICS

WELL-CHOSEN IMAGES AND INTERACTIVE FEATURES DRAW PATIENTS TO ORTHODONTIC WEB SITES



In orthodontics, strong visuals can be decision-makers for patients on the fence about accepting treatment. With the advent of practice Web sites that incorporate digital photography and imaging, patients now have personalized information at their fingertips. Providing online access to records and before-and-after photographs can also increase interaction with your current patient pool.

Paul Pocock, DMD, MSc, FRCD(C), who maintains offices in Surrey and North Vancouver, BC, wanted his Web site to be more than a static page. By providing personalized information for patients, he created an incentive for them to return to the site. "I think just having an orthodontic Web site on its own would not necessarily be exciting for patients," Pocock says. "I think if you're going to have a Web site, it's got to be catchy, it's got to have some functionality to it from an orthodontic point of view, and you've got to stay on top of it so it doesn't get stale."

Pocock launched his site (www.smilesbypocock.com) earlier this year. To create the Web site, Pocock hired a design firm that offered appointment reminders, account status pages, and online records for patients among other features. When preparing the photographs and images for the site, Pocock enlisted the help of a professional photographer and a Web designer who were the parents of one of his patients. The result is a custom-tailored Web site that makes good use of quality images.

Camera Ready

Pocock's use of photographs is unique because he incorporates several different techniques to display them. For example, the home page opens onto a formal staff photograph. As visitors watch, more playful head shots appear on top of the original image. During the photography session, it was difficult for the entire staff to be smiling at the same time, and so the photographer had encouraged silly poses to relax them.

"She had us do goofy things, and that's when we thought we should use the goofy photos to play in on top of the more formal one," Pocock says.

Pocock is most proud of the page devoted to cleft-palate treatment for babies, the specialty that is closest to his heart and one of the motivating factors behind his decision to go online. "The fact that I could rapidly get information to the parents of my cleft-palate baby patients was another reason for doing it," Pocock says. "We need to start with babies between 7 and 14 days old, and they can come from anywhere in our province or the Yukon. These people are traveling a fair distance to have treatment, and so it is much

easier if they can go online to see what we do and the results we get. They will know more readily what to expect when they arrive at the hospital."

This page features several before-and-after images of cleft-palate patients as well as the devices used during the process. Even more striking is the first image, which employs a morphing program to show the before-and-after progression for one patient's treatment. "The images show to a distraught parent, who has just had the shock of delivering a baby with a cleft, that this is something that can be dealt with. It starts to make them more comfortable about the whole process that they're going to go through."

Pocock, who lectures extensively on cleft-palate treatments, chose photographs from his presentations although he had to produce new text to accompany them. "I had to type in all the explanations because this time I had to have an explanation for a layperson—a parent—rather than professionals," he says.

It took approximately 4 to 8 weeks to prepare the information for the Web design company. Once completed, the images and text were saved on disks and clearly marked. "I indicated [to the designers] on each piece of text which photo should be placed with it," Pocock says.

Looking Ahead

Now that the Web site is up and running, Pocock plans to include more features and continue to encourage patients to visit the site. Recently, he launched an office newsletter that included a trivia "treasure hunt." To win prizes, patients were asked to visit the Web site to find answers to questions such as "What is the name of Dr Pocock's boat?"

"This is going to help me get the vast majority of my patients immediately onto the Web site and using it," Pocock says.

Pocock also plans to explore functionalities, such as incorporating online payments, offering records access to referring dentists and specialists, and including more before-and-after photographs from the office "brag book."

Patients and parents have been very receptive to the Web site. "We've had a number of people come up to us and say, 'Wow, what a great Web site.' We're getting quite a bit of feedback—I must admit, more than I thought we might," Pocock says.

Pocock looks forward to including more information on the site and making it as visual and useful for patients as possible. "That a picture tells 1,000 words is so true," he says, "and especially once you can put it on the Web." ■