



AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

American Counseling Association

“Dedicated to the growth and development of the counseling profession
and those who are served”

Proudly serving the counseling community for over
50 years!

5999 Stevenson Ave. Alexandria, VA 22304 / 800.347.6647 / 800.473.2329 (fax)

www.counseling.org

WEBSITES FOR COUNSELORS

"As a service to members, the American Counseling Association has partnered with Walsh and Dasenbrook, consultants in counseling practice management, to offer a series of bulletins on various private practice topics. This series includes timely information on starting or expanding a private practice, informed consent, HIPAA, managed care and insurance companies and strategies for enrolling as providers."

Walsh and Dasenbrook have co-authored, *The Complete Guide to Private Practice for Licensed Mental Health Professionals 3rd edition*. Their Guide contains the latest information on marketing, advertising, office procedures, dealing with managed healthcare and insurance billing. It also contains a CD-Rom with all the forms necessary for your practice. The Guide can be purchased through their web site at Counseling-PrivatePractice.com. For more information you can contact the authors at 3703 N. Main St. Suite 100 Rockford, IL. 61103 815.877.0399

Counselors need to embrace technology. In our workshops, we have always discussed the benefits of technology and how it applies to private practice. We recently came across an article stating that just over 50% of counselors use computers in their practice. We couldn't believe the figure was that low. This Private Practice Pointers Bulletin will address the benefits of establishing a web presence for your practice as well as how either the novice or computer savvy counselor can great website without being a Ph.D. in web design.

Why a website? Haven't counselors done just fine without them? Why all of sudden do counselors need to "advertise" on the Internet? Because, more and more our potential clients are searching for our services via this avenue. Moreover, our clients who come to us through more conventional means (referral, word of mouth etc..) expect us to have a web presence.

According to the Medical Broadcasting Company (2005), 65% of healthcare consumers reported that they use the Internet to research important health topics before and after they visit a doctor. Websites are dynamic, digital brochures that tell the world every minute of every day that you exist and are open for business. In today's healthcare market, clients not only expect you to have a website, but they also expect it to look professional and provide a comprehensive overview of your practice. Other reasons to have a website are:

- Provide potential clients and referral sources with 24/7 access to learn about your expertise in a particular type of treatment, modality, condition or field of healthcare.
- Create a professional online presence to build trust, reliability and a well-rounded practice profile.
- Attract web-oriented clients searching for mental health information online. Generations X and Y “Google” everything. You need to be there.
- Provide visitors with links and education about conditions, treatment options and relevant research.
- Post forms, directions & maps, answers to frequently asked questions, your CV, treatment philosophy and contact information online.
- Provide value added service. Would you join a professional organization (like ACA) if they offered no web based service?

Fortunately, with the proliferation of website technology over the past 5 years, there are now many do-it-yourself and reasonably priced professional website design options available. However, each has different features, advantages and disadvantages and price ranges. As is the case with any other practice investment, it is wise to do your research before you get started and set goals for what you aim to accomplish by creating a website for your practice.

Before we get to website options, let's identify the key elements of a website. The four key elements of a website are:

1. Domain
2. Hosting
3. Design
4. Cost

Domain refers to buying and renewing a website name. Purchasing a domain (known as "domain registration") and domain renewal (either each year or every several years) shouldn't cost more than \$10/year per domain. The public still thinks ".com" first, so always try to get a ".com" when possible. However, ".coms" are going fast so you may have to be creative in choosing your domain name. For our private practice we were able to use our last names, DasenbrookandJohnson.com and for our e-commerce site counseling-privatepractice.com seemed the way to go. Check out yahoo.com which sells domains for \$2.99/yr.

Hosting refers to the space, housing materials and technology that will sustain your website. Hosting plans offer many different features, but you focus on disk space and technical support. The "disk space" should be 500-1000 MB; this size will allow you to have e-mail accounts and enough space for pictures and perhaps video. Make sure technical support doesn't cost extra and that you will have access to a live person. Many companies save money with trouble tickets. Trouble tickets are customer e-mails sent to request changes or report problems with a site. Trouble tickets can be frustrating if you can't explain the problem. Our last hosting company switched to trouble tickets, so we

switched hosting companies! For our money, we want to deal with a live person. Lastly, if you plan to build your own site, make sure your hosting plan is compatible with the software you plan to use (e.g., Windows/FrontPage extensions and MS FrontPage).

Godaddy.com, ICDsoft.com and 1and1.com offer cheap hosting plans.

Design refers to how the site is laid out (colors, graphics, buttons, links, motion, video, audio, etc.) and what we like to call the “wow” factor. We have all seen boring websites and websites that are engaging... When clients click on your website, you want them to think your website is top notch. The designer could be a program, a company or a person used to create your website.

Costs can vary from a nominal monthly or quarterly fee for a no frills, one page biographical web page to more than \$1,000.00 for more comprehensive features.

Recognize the potential benefits a website can mean to your practice. It is our opinion that websites and the Internet will only continue to grow and be increasingly important to clients and counselors alike.

In terms of websites and costs, you have a lot of options. Recently, there has been a boom in the do-it-yourself (least costly) online web creation business. Companies (e.g., Yahoo, AOL, Godaddy.com, 1and1.com) provide cheap hosting space and online or downloadable software to create and update your website manually. This is great for clinicians who want a cheap solution and have the time, aptitude and patience to learn new software and manage any hosting problems.

Another option for low cost, no frills, biographical website is to consider an online referral service such as Psychology Today (Psychologytoday.com) or Provisions Consulting offered through the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA.org). You simply upload your practice information to a template. For a nominal monthly fee, they will host your one-page site and include it in their “Find a Therapist” consumer referral service.

Your last and more expensive option is to hire a professional to create a customized website from scratch. In the past, this might have cost thousands of dollars but today you can get a customized website for under \$1000 if you shop around. The biggest advantage of hiring a professional is that, besides writing your own copy, they do all the work for you so you can focus your efforts on what you do best - treating clients. Customized sites are also great because they can represent your personality and practice, and even captivate and inspire visitors to pick up the phone and call you. Your best bet is to find a small design firm or private contractor with hosting space.

Depending on the package you choose, a designer or contractor, can handle your domain registration, hosting, design, site maintenance and search engine submission (so your site shows up in Google or Yahoo, etc.). The best designers incorporate professional business and marketing experience into their design strategies so your site will look good and produce results.

Our research found that you can get a customized 10-page website, from start to finish, from a professional firm for less than \$600. The total fee should include domain registration and hosting for the first year, design, e-mail accounts and search engine submission. After the first year, there is an annual hosting fee of \$125-\$150. The best way to find these professionals is to ask for a referral from a colleague who already has a website that you like. Please feel free to check out our sites;

[Dasenbrook & Johnson - Licensed Clinical Professional Counselors](#)

[Walsh and Dasenbrook Consulting](#)

The fact that you are interested in having a website means that you are headed in the right direction. In the past, clinicians believed they could launch and grow their practice without marketing themselves. With increasing competition and decreasing reimbursement rates from insurance companies, mental health professionals can no longer sit back and wait for clients to come knocking. Websites are now a major part of any business plan and mental health is no exception. If technology is not your strength, find someone you trust who knows about websites, and get started, new clients are just a click away.

Technical assistance (actually he wrote a lot of it) for this article was provided by Joshua Rosenthal, MS of Therapymatch.com.