Guidelines for developing an effective Counselling service website

Introduction

A website or blog is one of the most significant investments a counsellor makes in their efforts to advertise their practice. However, all too commonly, basic rules are not followed and shortcuts are taken. The result is usually an underperforming site that could otherwise be an effective client recruitment tool. By applying a little more time, effort, investment and diligence at the front end, a useful and cost effective client recruitment tool can be established that requires only minimal ongoing maintenance.

This document has been produced to assist ACA members create more effective sites. Whilst it is not exhaustive by any means, it can serve as a checklist to ensure you have the basics covered. Some of the steps may at first seem daunting, but once you have them in place they’ll serve you well into the future.

Please note that this document is for informational purposes only. Optimising results from your website or blog can be a complicated process. Search engines use complicated algorithms for determining search results, and they purposefully maintain secrecy with respect to their algorithms. Optimising your site is therefore only ever based on industry expectations of how engines rate sites. The information contained in this document will however assist and is based on broadly accepted best practice at the time of writing.

Being Found

First and foremost your site needs to be found. There’s an immense volume of information on the web about the steps and processes required to list high up in Google search results (SERPs). We’ve distilled that down to the very basics for you.

1. URL. Your URL is the address of your website. It is one of the many things Google looks to in order to prioritise your website when someone conducts a search. When setting up your website it will assist if “counselling” is in the URL. If you use something erroneous, such as acronyms, Google robots will have more trouble relating your website to the service you offer – counselling. Your sub-page URL’s should also be applicable to the content on that page. This is particularly relevant to your services. I.e. www.newfarmcounselling.com.au/relationship-counselling

2. Google Services. Google dominates search – and it’s narcissistic. It loves those that use its services and rewards them for it by ranking them higher than those that don’t.

   a. YouTube. Google owns YouTube. If you host videos on YouTube and link them to your site, Google will reward you. It could be as simple as an introduction video to your practice, or you could record workshops. Making a video these days is simple. And given how significantly it can assist your search ranking, there’s really no excuse not to.

   b. Google + Locals. Google wants to make search results relevant. One way they are trying to achieve that is by making results local. Setting up a Google + Local account
will tell Google where your services are and assist Google return relevant local results to searches. It also assists searchers as Google can then list your practice information (address, phone, etc) on the search results page, thereby making it a simple, instantaneous process for the searcher to contact you.

c. Google Authorship. Google values quality content. By establishing yourself as a Google Author, Google will better be able to identify you as a publisher of content in your area of expertise.

d. Google AdWords. AdWords is Google’s paid advertising platform. If you use AdWords, when someone searches for one of your nominated Keywords (for instance, “counsellor new farm”), your advertisement will be shown at the top of the results page. Whilst AdWords allows you to fix a budget, it may be advisable to use AdWords on the advice of the professional.

3. Content. Search engines value content. Content is a primary determinant in establishing site relevancy and credibility. Content relates to the primary content on your site as well as content you post from time to time, and content you link to. For your content to be highly regarded, it should be relevant to your services and your target client/audience. Obviously the more targeted and niched your content and service, the better your chances at getting noticed and appreciated.

4. Social Media. You wouldn’t think robots are social, but they are. The search engine bots like social media as it reflects activity and relevancy. Consider setting up and linking to your site – Facebook, Google +, Twitter and LinkedIn. These are great ways to connect with prospects as well as peers.

5. Listings & Linking. This is important, but can also be fraught with danger. You must ensure that your listings and links are of the highest quality only. This is definitely a case of quality over quantity. Years ago sites used to enter into link exchange – an agreement to place links on their respective sites. This practice led to low quality sites gaining high search results and the search engines responded accordingly. Quality listing and linking for your site would include your ACA profile and Mind Your Head profile, as well as your State Member Association website (as well as the main social media platforms). Beyond that, be careful.

6. Networking & promoting. You should make your site as widely known and visible as possible. Traffic definitely plays a significant role in ranking. Simple ways include having your site URL in your email signature, on your business card and letterhead. Your site address should also be linked with your social media accounts.

Being Used

Being found is only half the battle. Once a prospective client arrives at your site you want them to 1/ make contact; and 2/ convert to a client. For this to occur your site needs to convey certain information that induces them to make contact.

1. Aesthetics. Your site should be well structured and professional. Information should be easy to find with a logical flow.

2. Language. You should communicate with prospective clients in language that makes sense to them – not you. Have friends and family proof read content to ensure you’re conveying the
right message.

3. Credibility. We talked about credibility above as it pertains to the search engines. You also need to portray credibility to your prospective client. They need to have confidence that you are professional and reliable, as well as experienced and knowledgeable in your field. Two simple and effective ways to portray credibility are through your bio, and through content publication. Your bio should be comprehensive (without over embellishing or exaggerating) whilst being concise. It should clearly articulate your qualifications, experience, interests and specialty areas. It should include a photo. And it should be reasonably consistent across the media it’s published on – website, social media sites, listings, etc. Publishing original content, such as articles, is also a good way to establish credibility with your prospective clients.

4. Services. The services you offer should be clear – as should be your credibility to provide them. Don’t try to be everything to everyone. If you do you’ll end up being no one to everyone. The most successful practitioners niche their services down to specialty areas and offerings.

5. Contact & Booking. Make it clear how prospects can contact you and book your service. Ensure they can contact you by various methods, as different people have different preferences when it comes to communication styles. So offer phone, email and web form as a minimum means of contact. If you have social media platforms established, ensure prospects are similarly clear as to how to contact you via those methods.

6. Location. The location of your consulting room should be clearly displayed. Preferably you can set this up with Google Maps. Google will like it, as will your prospects.

Helpful links

- ACA: www.theaca.net.au
- Mind Your Head: www.mindyourhead.com.au
- YouTube: www.youtube.com
- Google Authorship: https://plus.google.com/authorship
- Google AdWords: www.google.com.au/adwords
- Articles: ACA Journal, Counselling Australia; EBSCO Database; www.aipc.net.au/articles
- Blog platforms:
  - www.wordpress.com
  - www.blogger.com

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