How to improve your
web presence

>> You may be keeping up to date with the latest trends in your field but are you keeping up with the latest trends online? **Laverne Pereira** explains how your website can better represent your business in 2012.

Many a company – and health club – fail to create a significant web presence, as they only view their website as a representation of their brand and not as a tool to communicate and inform their visitors about the business. So, with all the competition around, how can you stand out from the rest? Keeping up with the trends and making a few simple changes through your web team can help you stay ahead.

Smart phones have rapidly become one of the most popular methods of accessing the web over the past year. Therefore, your site should be mobile friendly and, if it's not, it needs to be. According to *The Mobile Movement Study* (Google/Ipsos, April 2011), of website visits, 81% are smart phone originated and so by this time next year most sites will have mobile-friendly versions.

Web standards should also be adhered to when considering and updating your site – is your site meeting the requirements needed for accessibility, mobile web and privacy? (See www.w3.org/standards/webdesign)

Responsive design
Although desktop sites will still be popular, responsive design should be your main focus to get your mobile site created and functional on most devices: tablets, smart phones and even TV screens. The layout of a site will need to adapt to the size and orientation for different devices. It could be useful to hire a web designer for this (if you don't already have one), to tailor a new cascading style sheet (CCS – the coding which determines the look and style of the site) files for the key devices out there.

Content appearing on a desktop will need to be downsized for a mobile site version however, as the user will only want short snippets of information rather than scrolling through streams of content for the information they need.

It is also a good idea to add bigger call to action buttons – no visitor wants to squint to try and read a banner or try to zoom into a button to click it. Sites are navigated less by using point and click devices but more with our fingers, so we need to be able to touch a button without touching any other content. Layout, navigation, call to actions, content and photography need to be considered for a more mobile-friendly site.

You should incorporate brand guidelines into your design – a colour scheme and fonts that represent your company. Use these consistently throughout your site and use up-to-date fonts (Google web fonts allow you to update your site easily and for free). Keep your image files small, as optimising your images will minimise the loading time for your site, as well as keeping your site mobile friendly.

Interactivity
With new web technologies and programming languages such as HTML5 and CSS3, it is easier for designers to create sites which offer a richer, interactive experience. Animated transitions or effects created using CSS3 can enrich a visitor's experience and will encourage them to visit the site again and again, as well as sharing it with their friends or clients.

Photography
Are your images tailored specifically to your business and do they really portray what you want your business to be seen as? Are they recent? Or have you just used stock photography that could be outdated, dull and used in sites all over the web?

You don't have to spend thousands on a photoshoot to obtain captivating and original photography. Get your camera out and start taking some real and natural shots of your visitors, clients and premises and add them to your site. If you're not a great photographer, you will be surprised at who in your business may have a keen interest or, if all else fails, hire a photographer. Your web designer can then add filters and styles to the image to suit your website. Update your site regularly to give a fresh feel; once every quarter will give your visitors a sense of change and moving forward within your site.

Banners
Remember to use banners on your site to serve a purpose – could a link or a smaller image button work instead of a banner? Many sites are cluttered with banners and images on their homepage, which instantly overwhelms the visitor. If you need to grab their attention, use 'slider' images or content within your banner instead. It will take up less space, add movement to your site and still serve the same purpose. This could also be implemented with your advertising banners – having a smooth fade in, fade out transition could be an effective way to introduce advertisements on your website.

If you want to steer away from flash banners so your advertising can reach all devices, try using gif files instead, which can be easily created in Photoshop using its animation toolkit.

Video

Use YouTube as much as possible – it is owned by Google, so everything you do on there will automatically show up on Google searches and increase awareness of your business through search engine optimisation (SEO).

The fitness industry has a variety of filming opportunities, whether that be filming a class, a client's opinion on a class, a personal trainer giving some advice or capturing what is going on in your facility. It's free to use and it's an easy way to bring multimedia onto your site. Having a video section will engage your visitors and keep them there for a longer period of time. Updating your videos will also entice them to keep coming back.

Social media

While you may use social media, blogging is a consistent way to inform others about what is currently happening to your business via your website. Provide tags within these that are tailored to each post, so you are more likely to heighten your SEO. Also make sure to include images and video when possible.

Most importantly, however, make sure you have 'share' buttons on your blog: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and email. Also include a rich site summary (RSS) feed option, so people can subscribe to your posts.

Remember that you want to keep your visitors on your website, so embed social media applications so people don't have to leave, or be sure you refer to your site for further information on your social media pages.

Footers

Footer links at the bottom of your site add a helpful and simple solution for your visitors; if they can't find ›

something, they will be able to search for it there.

Including the top links for each page of your site would be useful to link to individual sections. This feature has been a popular trend with word press sites over the past two years (see www.viprfit.com or www.britishswimming.org) and can keep visitors on sites for longer when they are successful in finding the subject they want to navigate to.

Navigation

How many menu buttons do you have on your site? If it's more than six, you should decide whether you really need them. Visitors can be easily put off if they are given too many options. Instead, incorporate sections within the navigation menu into a 'mega menu', so visitors can then see other sections by hovering the icon over it.

User interaction within navigation can often be missed, which is a large part of the journey visitors take to go from section to section on a site. Using subtle hover colours and transitions could heighten your visitors' user experience. HTML5 and CSS3 have more options for such effects than previous versions, which could aid in improving the interactivity of your navigation bar.

Communication

Content is key when updating your site: are you promoting your business in a way that informs and excites your visitors? If the copy on your site has been there a few years, I would recommend getting a copywriter to update it for you. Having new and inviting copy on your homepage will act as an invitation to the rest of your site and motivate your visitor to check out what else you have to offer.
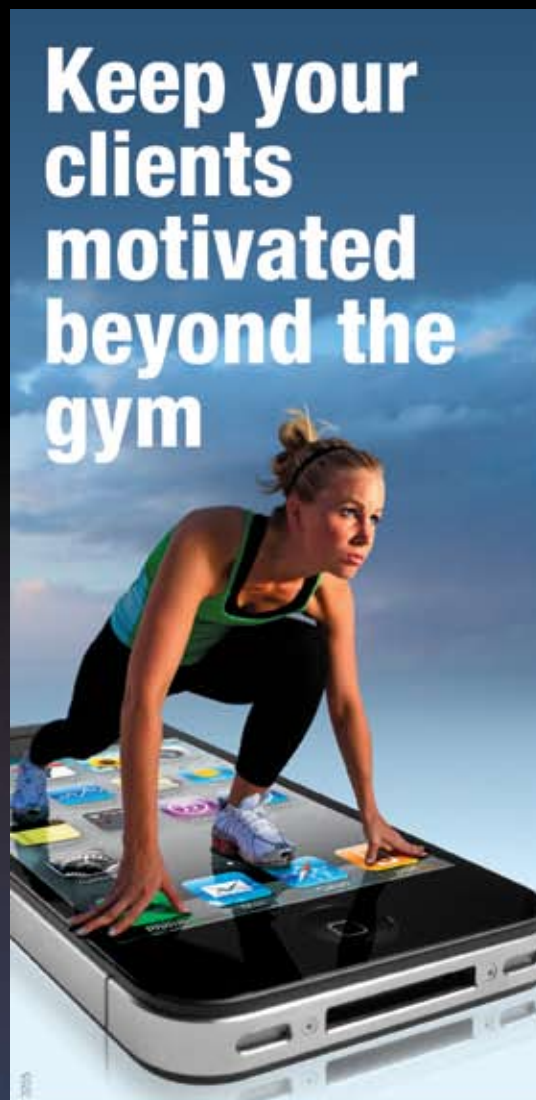
Analytics

Measuring how well your site is doing is essential for knowing what works well with your visitors and what doesn't. Simply adding tracking to your web pages with such sites as Google Analytics will allow you to gather details such as time spent on a specific page, page visits, location of visits and what time of day, as well as what device is being used to look at your site. With such data, you can then analyse the information you deliver and monitor where you can improve in the future.

Web technologies are introduced to us at a growing rate. The fitness industry has the opportunity to research, implement and analyse such technologies that could work to build a successful web presence, which could not only build on sales but help to develop a loyal client base, which will be a priceless asset to your business. *fpb*

Top 5 fitness sites with a good web presence:

1. www.virginactive.co.uk
2. www.gymbox.com
3. www.sohogyms.com
4. www.escapefitness.com
5. www.thecitypointclub.co.uk

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