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Ring Around the Net: The Advent of Webrings

By Michael Devitt

One of the most frustrating aspects of searching for information on the internet is the sheer volume of data that gets thrown a user's way when using a search engine like Lycos or AltaVista. Who has the time to go through 86,000 pages about Mark Twain, or 19,000 websites devoted to the Dallas Cowboys?1 Even conducting specific searches can sometimes produce hundreds of links.

There is a viable alternative. It's called a webring, and it has become one of the fastest-growing phenomena on the web in the past couple of years. If set up correctly, webrings can be used not just a source of information, but as a great marketing tool.

So What's a Webring?

Just as the name implies, a webring is a continuous, yet expanding group of linked websites that have common interests. If you were to start on a particular site and go through the entire index of sites on a webring, eventually you'd end up back where you began. Each site on a particular ring shares a common navigation system; with it, users can elect to go forward or backward through the ring, skip a group of sites at a time, visit other sites in the ring randomly, or see an index of all the sites that belong to that particular ring.

Most webrings are managed from one site, which includes an application that can select random sites and bypass links that have dropped out or are no longer functioning. Websites can also belong to more than one webring at a time, provided they fit the context of the ring (or rings) they wish to be a member of. There is no limit to the number of rings you can join; some sites belong to half a dozen rings or more.

The idea of creating a webring seems to have originated as a more personal alternative to the lists of "favorite sites" that many websites and search engines offer. The creator of the concept, 21-year old Sage Weil, started the first webring in May 1995 while still in high school. Since that time, the idea has taken root

and become a part of the culture of the internet. Rival services (such as Ringsurf and Looplink) have already sprung to try and divert some of the traffic that webrings generate.

Round and Round in the Ring

There are webrings dedicated to hundreds of activities, products, celebrities and services. There are webrings about Elvis; UFOs; big band music; Native Americans; computer games; the Animaniacs; labor unions; classic movies; crime novels; and the National Football League, just to name a few. Currently, more than 1.3 million websites are connected, making them members in a collection of more than 80,000 different webrings. An early article from *Webweek* magazine estimated that 1,800 sites a day add themselves to the Webring system;² that number has since risen dramatically.

Why are webrings so popular? There are several theories. For one, they really do offer a welcome alternative to search engines. Most webrings are very topic-specific; some even dedicate themselves to a particular character or famous person. If you had to choose between 10,000 or so Elizabeth Taylor websites on the internet versus browsing only 50 sites on the Liz Taylor webring, chances are you'd choose the webring.

Another reason that webrings are popular is that there are no "dead" sites on a webring. Because search engines continually receive new web addresses, it's virtually impossible to keep up with the amount of net-related garbage that floats around in cyberspace.

Most search engines don't update the information they're given. When you submit a site to Infoseek, for example, that search engine sends a program called a "spider" to verify that the address exists. If the address is a match, the search engine keeps the address in its database until it is notified otherwise. This means that if you conducted a search for "Stephen King," for example, you'd receive every reference about him - no matter how outdated or incorrect that information might be.

Webrings, on the other hand, are small enough that they can be monitored by a single person (or group of people) who repeatedly checks the address of each site in the ring to make sure it's still a viable website. If it isn't, that website is removed from the list, and the webring no longer recognizes that site as part of the ring. This saves users the frustration of ending up at a dead end by entering a site that no longer exists.

Moreover, in a webring, every site is equal. There are no favorites or hierarchies at work here; meta tags and keywords mean nothing when your site is part of a webring. Sites can be viewed at random, and the possibility of happening upon a truly remarkable personal website makes the experience that much more enjoyable, instead of having to plod through a series of cookie-cutter educational or commercial sites for the same information.

The development of webrings is truly a grassroots affair. The free code used to create webrings was created not by one of Bill Gates' monopolistic supplicants, but by a high-school kid looking for a way to help people share common interests. That it was not created by someone from Microsoft probably adds to its allure. And joining a ring helps the people who make personal sites garner the two things they are usually denied on the internet: personal attention and recognition.

Joining a Webring

Let's say you've put a lot of time and effort into designing a website about your favorite rock group, or an old movie star ... or your chiropractic practice. You've published your site on the internet and registered it with the major search engines, but for some reason, people aren't visiting. How do you increase traffic and let people know about the little masterpiece you've created?

One option to consider is joining a webring. The best way to do that is to visit Ringworld (<http://www.webring.org/ringworld>), a comprehensive listing of every webring currently in use. Ringworld is divided into nine general categories, such as entertainment, health, and sports and recreation; categories are further subdivided into more specific areas of interest. The site also has a search engine which lets you find webrings that contain the exact type of information you're looking for.

Once you find a webring that suits you, the next step is to apply for admission into that ring. Each webring has an online application form that new users fill out to be added to the ring. Among the information you'll need to provide: the site owner's name; the title of your site; the web address where your ring will be displayed; your e-mail address; a keyword description of the site; and a password (so that you can go back and make any changes to the ring as needed).

After filling out an application, the next step involves cutting and pasting the HTML code onto your website. If you're familiar with word processing programs such as Microsoft Word or Wordperfect, it's as easy as selecting a portion of text from one document, then cutting and pasting it in another. If you're a little

leery about working with HTML, you can also enter the code by hand.

Once the code has been cut and pasted onto your site, you may need to edit portions of the code to include personal information, such as your name, e-mail address and an ID number. You may also have to download the graphic images that are associated with many webrings, but most application forms also give instructions on how to save an image and upload it to your website.

Most webrings have an automated response form that lets you know when you've been added to that particular ring and provides you with instructions on what sections of your ring's HTML code need editing. Usually, this process takes a couple of days, depending on the size of the ring and the number of users applying for admission. Once you've been admitted to the ring, it's just a matter of plugging in the right information.

Webrings and Chiropractic

While there are no purely chiropractic webrings, there are a number of webrings which may be of some indirect assistance to chiropractors. Becoming a member of one or more of these rings might also increase the amount of traffic to your website, which could benefit your practice and give others a better understanding of the chiropractic profession.

The Natural Healing Webring (<http://www.fsfsi.com/naturalhealing>) is maintained by an organization called PnR Alternatives and boasts over 130 sites in its ring. Its intent is to promote sites that "contain information, educational services or product information as they apply to natural healing methods." In addition to chiropractic, the ring contains sites that have information on acupuncture, ayurveda, holistic healing and homeopathy.

The **Spinal Cord Injury Webring** contains web pages that are (supposedly) related exclusively to spinal cord injuries, spinal cord injury resources and spinal cord injury rehabilitation facilities.

An average-sized ring, it consists of approximately 110 websites and can be found at <http://www.tbi-sci.org/sciring>.

One of the largest webrings in existence, the **Emergency 911 Ring** (<http://home.earthlink.net/~codern2/webring.html>) is comprised of more than 480 member sites. The ring's description says that it "provides a way to surf the Web for other ages following the concept of providing

health, public safety and education related resources dedicated to people's well being." The ring's main objective is to serve as a resource to the online community while also educating people about health care and safety issues.

There are also health-related webring that tackle issues such as spina bifida, mental health, weight loss, women's health and premature infant care. A complete list of all health-related webring is available on line at <http://www.webring.org/ringworld/health.html>.

If you're thinking about joining a webring, spend some time perusing the other sites listed in that particular ring first; it pays to know your electronic neighbors are beforehand. Joining a webring is a good way to attract attention to your site and gives users a feeling of acceptance and being connected. In the end, it could conceivably result in more patients and a better level of doctor/patient communication. If nothing else, just joining a webring will help spread the message of the benefits of chiropractic a little further along the internet.

References

1. Searches conducted on the Infoseek and Northern Light search engines, November 12, 1999.2. Marlatt A. "Web rings" emerge as alternative to search engines. Webweek October 20, 1997.

[IMAGE]

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