

Helping Patients and Families Connect with the Right Services

6 Things to Avoid When Choosing an Online Service Directory



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A brief summary

Patients and families often struggle to find the health care services they need.

It's one of the major problems that health care system reform in Ontario is meant to address. But how can agencies mandated to improve system navigation be certain they are consistently connecting the people they serve with the right services in their communities?

What's needed is an easy-to-search, reliable service directory that yields complete and accurate results. This executive report presents 6 red flags that help you screen out online service directories that don't do the job correctly.



Not all service directories are created equal

Agencies mandated to support health care system navigation in Ontario rely on online directories to connect the people they serve with the services they need. Of course, people will Google things for themselves, but the results they get back typically won't show the full range of relevant services available in their community. An easy-to-search, reliable health and community services directory yields more complete and accurate results.

Agencies may use these online directories in a variety of ways:

- Searching for relevant services while talking with patients or families in person or over the phone
- Recommending a directory to patients or families so that they can search for services themselves
- Providing a find services search tool on the agency's website for visitors to use

The trouble is that not all online service directories are created equal.

Some directories are incomplete, out-of-date, or not all that useful.

When an agency uses one of these sub-standard directories, they risk the following:

- Passing along out-of-date information to patients and families
- Failing to connect a patient with a vital support service
- Performing poorly in their system navigation role

This can cause patients and families unnecessary grief. And it can reflect poorly on the agency's reputation. The key is to recognize sub-standard online service directories and know how to avoid them.

"Patients are more likely to continue using a technology if a health care practitioner has recommended it. Without a recommendation based on a relationship of trust between a patient and a clinician, sustained use of digital technologies will be difficult and their potential value to patients, clinicians, and health care systems undermined."

- New England Journal of Medicine Catalyst, June 5, 2019.



The 6 red flags

1. Incomplete listing of services
2. Out-of-date information
3. Unclear service descriptions
4. Poor search results
5. No simple way of sharing search results
6. Not impartial



1 Incomplete listing of services

An incomplete list of services may cause patients and their families to miss out on receiving health or community services that are important to them.

Some companies that create service directories charge agencies to be listed in them. Not all agencies will choose to pay, meaning only certain services will appear. Patients or families who visit these directories may be left with the false impression that they're looking at a complete list.

Some directories are narrow in their scope. For instance, they may just list retirement homes and assisted living facilities. They don't show other types of helpful services that your patients or their families may not have considered.

How can I tell if the list of services is incomplete?

Use the directory to look through categories of services in a community that you're familiar with. Are there reputable services that have been operating for more than a year that are missing, particularly services that are free or low-cost?

Ask yourself whether the directory contains a wide enough range of service categories for the people you serve. Consider community as well as health services.

"The reality is there's a lot of resources out there that we (family physicians) don't know about." - Dr. Gord Schacter

2 Out-of-date information

Patients and families can become frustrated when they discover that an agency is no longer offering a service that's listed in an online service description (or that the agency has moved or shut down completely).

Sometimes people will assume that information they find online is current. But that's not always the case.

How can I tell if information is out-of-date?

Check a number of service records for an indication of when they were last updated. Reliable directories set a goal of making sure that at least 85% of their records are updated every year

According to The Change Foundation's 2018 Spotlight on Ontario's Caregivers Report, 58% of family caregivers turn to the internet. The trouble is that when Ontario caregivers are looking for services, they may not get what they need by doing a standard Google search.

3 Unclear service descriptions

Patients and families can also become frustrated when they read long service descriptions that don't get to the point and that may include professional jargon.

Some online directories weren't originally created for public use. They might have been designed for phone operators responding to calls from the public, which is why they don't have plain-language service descriptions.

Patients and families may also have a hard time comparing similar services if their descriptions are different. For instance, two adult day programs operated by separate agencies may be described very differently even though they provide the same type of service. These differences may unduly influence which service a patient or family chooses to contact.

Inconsistencies in descriptions of similar services can occur when a directory doesn't provide guidelines or templates for agencies to follow when submitting service information.

How can I tell if service descriptions are unclear?

Check a few service descriptions. Are you unable to tell what the service is in the first sentence? Does the description ramble on for several paragraphs? Does it use professional jargon? Is it vague?

Look up similar services offered by different agencies. Is there a noticeable difference in the way these services are described?

"Findings emphasized the need to be more inclusive by avoiding the use of exclusionary jargon so that all members of the health care team, including patients and families, can adopt a collaborative practice orientation." Study results reported in Journal of Interprofessional Care, 2011

4 Poor search results

Most patients and families are looking for services close to them. When doing a search, they don't want to scroll through a long list that includes services offered to people in other areas of the province.

Some directories don't give sufficient weighting to local services in their search algorithms, which is why search results may include out-of-area services.

Patients and families may also run into troubles when browsing sub-categories of services. For instance, if they're searching for mental health services and dive deeper to find related support groups, they may be presented with a list of support groups in general, not just those specific to mental health.

These types of problems can occur if service categories weren't set up properly or there's a problem with the directory's built-in search tool.

How can I tell if search results are poor?

Using a directory's built-in search tool, search for a category of services to see what's offered locally. Do services appear that aren't applicable to the local area?

Now search for services using one of the categories in the directory (e.g. health care facilities, health conditions, etc.). Try to refine your search. Check whether the results are as specific as you hoped they'd be.

"While general local search best practices hold true across industries, it is important for health providers to understand the key differentiators within their local space and create a strategy designed to help patients easily access the care they are looking for."
- Search Engine Journal, Feb 8, 2019.

5 No simple way of sharing search results

Your staff may want to share a personalized list of services with a patient. Or a patient may want to share a list of services with their family or other people in their support network. Printing can be a hassle, and it's problematic when you're not face-to-face. Not only that, printed information can quickly become out of date.

Manually copying and pasting the web addresses for each service into an email takes time and some technical know-how. Check to see whether there's a simpler, more efficient way of sharing search results via email.

How can I check if there's a simple way of sharing search results electronically?

Some directories have a feature that allows you to share individual service descriptions by email and/or social media. Even better are the directories that allow you to share a list of services that you've saved to a custom clipboard. Go to a service description and check whether there are any hyperlinks or buttons labelled "share" or "clipboard" or something similar. Try them out.

"One impact of networked digital media is that people are being pushed to be more informationally self-sufficient." - Gunther Eysenbach, University of Toronto

6 Not impartial

Some online directories try to sell you something. They may do this through obvious methods (ads, special offers, invitations to purchase a service or product). Or their approach may be more subtle (omitting certain services, describing some services more favourably than others, subtly but consistently leading users to a particular agency's service).

Patients and families may be steered towards a service that's not the best fit for them.

How can I tell if a directory is not impartial?

There are no hard and fast rules, but here are a few questions you might ask to assess whether an online service directory has a particular bias:

- Are there efforts (subtle or otherwise) to get you to purchase a product or service, particularly one offered by the operator of the directory?
- Are there ads on the site?
- Is the directory supported by any form of corporate sponsorship?
- Does the directory appear to favour certain service providers over others?
- Can the operator of the directory be considered impartial?

"Whereas people may be savvy and experienced enough to evaluate the credibility of a general news web site or an e-commerce site, they may have insufficient experience and expertise with health Web sites, which are generally not used on a day-to-day basis." - Gunther Eysenbach, University of Toronto

Benefits of choosing a reliable service directory

So, what are the benefits to agencies that have done their due diligence, paid attention to the 6 red flags, and chosen an online service directory that's:

- Complete
- Up-to-date
- Clear and consistent in its service descriptions
- Reliable in the way it searches for services
- Easy to use when it comes to sharing search results
- Impartial

Here are some of the payoffs:

- Less staff time spent searching for appropriate services or passing on information to patients and families
- Better identification of local agencies that can support your agency's patients and families (improved continuity of care)
- Increased traffic to your agency's website (if you embed a find services tool linked to a reliable service directory)





What are the next steps?

Now that you're familiar with the 6 red flags, use them to evaluate the quality of service directories your agency may be considering.

Check out organizations and initiatives that have successfully integrated a high-quality service directory into their websites. Here are a few examples:

- **Health Care Options:**
ontario.ca/locations/health
- **GTA Rehab Finder:**
gtarehabfinder.ca
- **Champlain Healthline:**
Champlainhealthline.ca
- **Age-Friendly Sarnia-Lambton:**
agefriendlysarnialambton.ca
- **Changing CARE:**
caregivershuronperth.ca

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