



Web Review

Healthcare Associations Best Practices in Internet Communication

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In his book *The Virtual Community*, author Howard Rheingold made the point that the future of the Internet is linked to the future of community, as well as the respective futures of democracy, education, science and intellectual life in general, and vice versa.

Many of the traditional units of social organization, such as the church, are less powerful than they were in the past. Increased mobility has also contributed to the breakdown of a sense of rootedness and community. The Internet transcends geography, and offers a sense of connectedness in a timely way. As a result, it has become a tool that is transforming some units of organization, and facilitating the development of new ones, fostering the creation of virtual communities based on common or shared interests.

Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “the global village” long before the Internet and the world wide web. Michael Dertouzos, director of the MIT Laboratory for Computer Science, built on that analogy to describe a world of connected computers as an information marketplace forming the nexus of a global community.

The key to a global digital community – or a neighborhood within the community, such as chat groups or game playing – **is interaction.** Two-way communication is perhaps the single critical success factor in creating a sense of community.

Organizations that recognize the power of the Internet as a means for creating a virtual community can facilitate communication with, between and about

members. Associations are groups that can reap significant benefit from the Internet, which offers improved access to information, thereby enhancing visibility and accountability. It offers “digital democracy” by providing a channel for dissemination of information to members. It also makes organizations more accessible to non-members, allowing them to highlight their mission, goal and objectives, and also put key messages on record.

Associations, societies and a range of organizations face twin challenges. They feel an increasing need to demonstrate their value to members. In addition, they face an unprecedented need to reach out into other communities. This can best be done by communicating important information in a timely manner.

A growing number of organizations are finding that a website can help them balance their dual need for internal and external communication. This has particular value in healthcare, where there has been a recent surge of interest in both collaboration and accountability.

Communication is a critical tool for healthcare, which is complex and highly regulated. It also has its own jargon, particularly the dialects of medicine and management, which can be obscure to the point of impenetrability. If information is disseminated passively by simply posting it to a website, it should be in language that is accessible to the uninitiated.

While posting information to a website, where anyone can find it, represents a progressive improvement in communication over paper, associations and other membership organizations are

increasingly coming to the recognition that it takes interactive communication to build the sense of community that should be their goal. This is a lesson the organizations and associations discussed below have applied successfully in the development of their websites.

1. AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

www.ama-assn.org

The American Medical Association (AMA) is as much an advocacy organization as it is a scientific body, and the website contents tacitly recognize that role. Since 1883, the AMA has published the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, the medical journal with the highest circulation in the world. It also publishes several other journals devoted to medical specialties. The website offers links to journals and other news and information for physicians, the media and the public, ranging from the AMA’s strategic plan to peer-reviewed resources on issues such as HIV/AIDS, asthma, migraine and women’s health. It also offers members-only forums, and links to resources that will locate either a specific physician or hospital anywhere in the U.S.

2. ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN MEDICAL COLLEGES

www.aamc.org

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) was established in 1890. Membership today consists of the 125 accredited U.S. medical schools as well as the 16 in Canada, with standardized application information. Meetings and conferences are featured for professional

development. In addition to background linking the creation of AAMC to physician education reform more than 100 years ago, the AAMC website highlights medical schools' triple mission of research, education and patient care. The website contains links to the schools, as well as to about 400 major teaching hospitals and health systems, although Canadian representation on that list is minimal. It also offers news about health policy and business, information about government affairs and advocacy, and publications.

**3. NURSING ASSOCIATIONS
AMERICAN NURSES ASSOCIATIONS**

www.nursingworld.org

The American Nurses Association (ANA) proclaims that registered nurses are the human link between the healthcare industry and the patient. Given the sheer weight of the 2.6 million nurses represented by the ANA, it has become a loud voice in restructuring and healthcare reform, advocating in the interests of both the profession and the public. The website offers extensive information about the ANA itself, and ANA*NET, a members-only section, as well as e-mail lists and newsgroups. It also offers links to the state associations and organizational affiliates including the American Academy of Nursing, the American Nurses Credentialing Centre and the American Nurses Foundation. The site includes the Nightingale pledge, the nursing profession's equivalent of the Hippocratic oath. There is also training for political action, news about legislation, Congressional testimony regarding occupational health and safety issues such as latex allergies, as well as links to nursing journals and nursing research. Innovative uses of the website include an electronic form to sign in support of a petition for the Patients' Bill of Rights, and an on-line survey regarding on-the-job assaults of healthcare professionals.

CANADIAN NURSES ASSOCIATION

www.cna-nurses.ca

The Canadian equivalent is the Canadian

Nurses Association (CNA), which is a federation of 11 provincial and territorial nursing associations, representing more than 110,000 registered nurses. While almost all the website is accessible to the public, the contents focus mainly on professional concerns such as certification. There is also an on-line bookstore, and links to other nursing organizations, but not a great deal of advocacy material. There is some information of general interest, including an interesting comparison of nursing salaries across Canada. The only password-protected area is the new on-line recruitment system.

**4. RADIOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF
NORTH AMERICA**

www.rsna.org

The Radiological Society of North America (RSNA) represents about 30,000 radiologists, physicists and allied scientists. They are a technology-friendly group, probably because of the nature of their work, and the RSNA website reflects that. It consists of several areas including pages devoted to the association's past two annual conventions, and on-line publications such as the journal *Radiology*. Learning resources and practice resources are readily accessible, and the site hosts research links and classified ads. There are extensive links to other related organizations, including the departments of radiology at McMaster University Medical School, the University of Alberta and the University of British Columbia in Canada.

**5. HEALTH INFORMATION
MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS SOCIETY**

www.himss.org

The Health Information Management Systems Society (HIMSS) is a professional membership organization that represents about 12,000 individuals involved with clinical and information systems, management engineering and telecommunications. HIMSS says it has 40 chapters and six interest groups in the United States, Canada, Latin America and Australia. The website contains a range of information about the organiza-

Check Them Out!



tion and the benefits of membership, including an area restricted to members only with a job board. It also offers information to the media and the public.

HIMSS recently developed a formal relationship with several related organizations (the American Health Information Management Association, the American Medical Informatics Association, The Centre for Healthcare Information Management and the College of Healthcare Information Management Executives) to form the Joint Healthcare Information Technology Alliance (JHITA), in order to pursue common interests, including advocacy in the United States. Through that link, the organizations offer bi-monthly issue reports on U.S. legislation and regulation, and a series of advocacy papers covering issues such as the Year 2000 and healthcare, a consumer/patient bill-of-rights, and the unique patient-identifier project.

6. AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

www.apha.org

This 125-year-old organization based in Washington, D.C. has a website organized into four broad areas: Legislative Affairs and Advocacy; News and Publications; Science, Practice and Policy; and Public Health Resources. It offers the table of contents and abstracts on-line for the *American Journal of Public Health*, as well as highlights from a monthly publication entitled *The Nation's Health*, focused on legislation and regulation at the national, state and local level, and an electronic bookstore. The site also has pages devoted to the APHA's history, annual convention, continuing education, special primary interest groups (SPIGs), as well as affiliated organizations. The site offers fax-on-demand information, and includes a members-only area that lists job openings.

7. ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

www.rwjf.org

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

is the largest philanthropic organization in the United States exclusively devoted to health issues. It provides about \$300 million annually in grants, and supports hundreds of projects. The foundation is in the midst of a restructuring that will refocus it on health and healthcare. The website could benefit from some reorganization and updating, but contains a wealth of information.

8. SOCIETY OF RURAL PHYSICIANS OF CANADA

www.srpc.ca

The Society of Rural Physicians of Canada (SRPC) is a superb example of how the internet can create both a virtual community and a sense of community. In the face of longstanding and ongoing problems with recruitment and retention of physicians to serve rural areas, and the sense of professional isolation felt by physicians working in rural communities, the SRPC was incorporated in 1995. The on-line discussion group known as RuralMed was established that year, and the first issue of the society's quarterly peer-reviewed publication, the *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine*, was launched in 1996. Recognizing that physicians in rural communities may have to pay long-distance charges for modem access, the website has been designed to keep file sizes to a minimum so that they can be downloaded quickly. The site offers access to information about the SRPC, its journal, RuralMed, the distinctive challenges of rural medicine generally and on a province-by-province basis, links to related articles, an area for locums and practices seeking locums, and other related information, some of it not available from any other source.

9. ARTHRITIS CANADA


www.arthritis.ca

The Arthritis Canada website is a hybrid site, funded by the pharmaceutical company Searle Canada, creating a virtual space for people who share an interest in rheumatology and arthritis. The site

actually hosts the Arthritis Society, the Canadian Rheumatology Network, the Canadian Arthritis Network (part of the national Network of Centres of Excellence program), the Cochrane Musculoskeletal Group and the Arthritis Healthcare Providers, an Ontario-based inter-disciplinary group of health professionals who deal with arthritis. The Arthritis Society area covers consumer information, including types of arthritis, how to live with it, programs and resources (including the quarterly magazine *Arthritis News*), "the politics of arthritis," and links to provincial offices of the society. The rheumatology network is a password-protected "virtual meeting ground for rheumatologists to share references, resources and ideas." The Cochrane section consists of reviews by researchers and consumers of arthritis research.

10. ONTARIO HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

www.oha.com

The Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) is Canada's last remaining provincial hospital association, serving the greatest concentration of population and hospitals in the country. It was among the first healthcare associations in the country to establish a website to support its mission, which includes advocacy and education. The site lists its comprehensive schedule of educational programs and information about the annual convention. It also offers a weekly publication, *Executive Report*, as well as the quarterly *Hospital Perspectives*, and a steady stream of news releases. There are extensive links to the province's hospitals with websites and to other related organizations including healthcare vendors. A recently-added feature includes hospital job postings. There is also a password-protected members-only discussion forum and a restricted link to the OHA's Change Foundation web site. 

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