

Should You Go Online?

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Editor's note: Rob Sherman is general counsel to the Ohio State Chiropractic Association (OSCA), and served as OSCA executive director from 1984-1990. He is co-author of the book, Risk Management in Chiropractic: Developing Malpractice Prevention Strategies, and co-editor of The Chiropractic Legal Update, a bimonthly newsletter designed to educate doctors on current legal issues.

In the last year, I think I've tried just about every "you have to try this" technology. Some are useful and some are a waste of time. An example of an excellent use of technology is the ability to fax items directly from your computer and to send documents directly to another computer.

I am also online with CompuServe and America Online (AOL). I have surfed the net until my eyes have glazed over. I frequently use e-mail instead of using the phone, as opposed to "snail mail."

Should you use technology in your office? Absolutely. Are some advances useful and others a waste of time? Absolutely.

So what should you consider?

A Computer

I know you're still out there. Those doctors typing away with their 50 year old Smith Coronas. I still get your correspondence, smudges and all.

If you don't care about the appearance of your correspondence or how quickly you will receive payment from third parties, stay with your old friend. No need to change.

But like it or not, you are judged by every written document that comes from your office. And soon you will need a computer and modem to send all your bills electronically to third parties for payment. Many of you are using electronic billing currently and have found it the best way to receive prompt payment. Good reason alone to computerize the office.

Online Services

Now the bigger question. Should you get online? There is no question that eventually every doctor will need to get online. On-line services are relatively inexpensive and they all offer free trial times. You might want to try several services before deciding.

American Online offers several "chat" areas that discuss chiropractic issues. CompuServe offers chiropractors a great deal of research oriented information.

The Internet

I love surfing the Internet. But if you surf without a purpose you will find yourself wasting valuable

time. There are several chiropractic services that use the Internet such as CHIROLARS (817 898-0234) and ChiroLink (408 356-3898).

While the Internet is definitely "cool," it concerns me that postings are there for public consumption. Some of the discussions and postings that appear on the Internet could come back to haunt this profession.

Using an Internet access service such as Netcom, you can send e-mail and surf the Internet cheaply (about \$20 a month). And if you live in a city with a local access number, you do NOT pay long distance charges.

The Internet access route is the cheapest and most ideal for many doctors. However, AOL is a good bet for those who don't mind the extra fees and want more guidance in using on-line services.

So Should You Should Get Online?

Let me tell you specifically how I use the online services to see if my use applies to your interests.

I'm involved with various "stakeholder" groups regarding a new program for our state association. All of the participants are on-line and e-mail one another. I am connected to Jim Palmer of Proctor & Gamble, Eric Burkland of the Ohio Manufacturers' Association, bureau decision-makers, labor representatives, as well as all trade association representatives via e-mail. We talk to one another daily. Yes, daily. This communication creates a community of interest on a variety of health care subjects, not just this project.

I am also connected to the OSCA executive committee and any board member that makes a request to join the conversation. If it is of interest to the membership, I forward this communication to those members online. This is the best way for them to be part of our communications network. Currently, the OSCA executive committee is on AOL.

I also use the Internet to obtain justice department decisions. I received the latest on practice guidelines from the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR). The Ohio Podiatric Medical Association's "home page" links me to many useful health care services. A home page is comparable to the front page of a magazine, with buttons to send you places. With the click of a button I travel to the Health Care Finance Association (HCFA) and review health care items of interest from our friends in the federal government. I use CompuServe, AOL, and the Net to search publications for health care articles.

I am also connected to the public library through the library's own system. The library will send any requested book to my local branch. What a time saver. (I listen to audio tapes from the library on my way into work.)

Obviously, for those of you who want to keep up with today's health care events and then plan accordingly, getting online is essential.

The Drawbacks

You have to turn on your computer and access the Internet or on-line service to get your e-mail. Although you could keep your connection turned on all the time and still pay only a \$20 fee, I know many people who have not gotten into the habit of hitting the computer "on" button, so e-mail sits around unread for days.

Also, getting online adds more time to your business day. Busy doctors often look at the computer

as another demand on their time. I take an extra hour a day to check e-mail and answer inquiries, sometimes less; sometimes more. But for me, it is a time saver. I can answer calls and speak informally to people around the country ... and the world. It's part of my job, and I enjoy it.

Recommendations

Get online and see for yourself if it is worth the cost. If you don't have experience in computer online services, try America Online to start. You can reach me at: ShermanRPS@aol.com

So, take the plunge. Get online and see if it makes sense for you. Be patient at first. But after a while, you'll wonder how you lived without it.

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