

## Is "Word of Mouse" Replacing Word of Mouth?

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I know this article will be met with a variety of reactions from various readers because of the wide and diverse demographics of our profession, but I just could not help wondering if this entire "social networking" craze is causing many doctors to ignore the fact that old-fashioned "word of mouth" communication has not been replaced (at least not yet) by "word of mouse." That being said, the ease of virtual communication is alluring and may be influencing doctors to transport this communication style to their doctor-patient encounters. It may work, but there are also potential dangers in trying to replace a face-to-face encounter with a Facebook encounter.

Obviously the Internet, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, My Space and a host of other networking sites are changing the landscape of how we obtain and disseminate information. The list of social networking Web sites extends from Adult Friend Finder (for dating/hook-ups) to Zoo.gr (a Greek Web meeting point), with just about everything and anything in between. The most common sites, such as those listed above, have registered users from 33 million to 250 million, and the numbers are growing daily. One simply cannot ignore this trend and its popularity, but the larger question is, how can we make some sense of this new wave of communication in a manner that is meaningful in our everyday practices while staying alert to the potential dangers of the electronic world?

It was just a few short decades ago that we only used handwritten notes. The progression from notes to typewriters to word processors and computers to e-mail and beyond has been meteoric. I was told in a recent meeting that e-mails are "so yesterday." I was informed that Twitter uses "tweets," which are limited to 140 characters or less; that this is the wave of tomorrow and I should get with it. I thought to myself, "OMG," and then realized I actually knew that OMG meant "Oh My God." (And then I was concerned about whether I could say God.) It seems that spelling doesn't count, grammar doesn't count and the ability to do basic math may soon become a lost art.

When Facebook adds 100 million users to its Web site in less than nine months, you can be certain there is a tidal wave of communication changes coming. How to make sense of it all will be the challenge. In education, for example, online enrollment is at an all-time high. How will that change the way we deliver and process future information? What will our chiropractic colleges need to do to not only keep up, but also innovate to provide education the way students want to receive it?

The last presidential election was the first election in history in which the Internet and other social networking sites played a key role in delivering the message the candidate was trying to convey and generating the funds needed to continue their campaign. Future elections will forever be changed by this new media portability. Print newspapers are in serious economic difficulty because of the advent of Web portals for 24/7 news. In many cases, new houses are not wired for land-line phones anymore because cell phones have overtaken the need for a permanent phone. And try finding a telephone in an airport, or forgive me, a telephone booth along a highway or at a service station.

How rapidly the landscape, which was once so familiar to most of us, has changed in a few short years.

Many HR departments have indicated that their primary method of seeking and obtaining employees is via the Internet on LinkedIn or some other employment portal. The social networking portals have also changed the way people are doing business and the way businesses are "doing" people. By "doing people" I mean that a bad experience now becomes "viral" and literally thousands of people effortlessly are influenced positively or negatively about your restaurant, store, office, product - or practice. The World Is Flat, by Thomas Friedman, is an eye opening and revealing book that emphasizes how the Internet has leveled the playing field in so many ways.

So, what about chiropractic in this ever-advancing age of technology? The airline motto "If you have time to spare, go by air" has given me an opportunity over the past few months to have some personal interview time with folks from all walks of life as we sit patiently in comfortable but Spartan airports waiting for weather, mechanical difficulties or crew changes to allow us to continue our journey. If they ask me what I do, I tell them I am a journalist (not really a lie, I rationalize to myself; after all, I write this column) and want to ask them some questions about how technology has changed their life. Most seniors admit that they were reluctant to use a cell phone in the beginning, but now it has enabled them to be more independent and keep in touch with their children and friends more often. The cell phone particularly seems to have given them empowerment and a sense of freedom they had not enjoyed in the past.

I then ask people about their health care and their doctor, specifically if their doctor is attentive and gives them all the information they need. Most are happy with their doctor, happy with their health care, frustrated with the paperwork and the appointment process, and wish their doctor would spend more time with them on their visits, but generally they are OK with things. Most admit to bewilderment and a feeling of a loss of control if they have ever been hospitalized.

I ask them about having their doctor "e-mail" them information or communicate with them some other way than at an office visit. Without question, they want less hassle in getting appointments; they want their doctor to talk to them and spend some additional time with them during their office visit. They want their doctor to know them.

It does not surprise me that in this world of 24/7 connectedness, we are reaching that paradox by which we are in touch more with devices, but out of touch with our hearts. We can create an e-mail and send it to hundreds of people in a moment, yet we cannot talk with eye contact to the person next to us. My concern with doctors who are in this tech generation is that the patients they serve may still need that hand to hold, the eye contact, the voice to be heard and the feeling of caring conveyed in an old-fashioned way.

I think the ability of this new technology is fantastic and electronic medical records are certainly the wave of tomorrow (if not today). Computers will store, distribute, disseminate and analyze data in ways that are now just scratching the surface. Technology will enable breakthroughs in health care and enhance our quality of life, but computers, no matter how well programmed, are still impersonal. They cannot feel, be touched emotionally, laugh or cry.

Technology in our homes will transform where we now just live to where we now can live better. Appliances that talk, bathrooms that are mini laboratories, kitchen cabinets that monitor our diet, and interconnected media devices that bring us selective programming of our choice are all innovations accomplished with great technology. My fear is that we may begin to think that the simple gesture of a hug, the confidence conveyed with the touch of a hand, and the healing power of human touch are less

and less important because we connected instead in some virtual fashion. I am afraid we will lose the distinctly human quality that makes all of us (and particularly doctors of chiropractic) unique.

Perhaps my lament for the human touch and understanding is because of how important it has been (and continues to be) to the healing process; no amount of technology will replace the touch of the human hand. As doctors of chiropractic, we must be ever vigilant in our balance between the high-tech and the high-touch. There is just something magical about human communication, person to person; e-mails and tweets just don't compare.

With the economy in a slump, some practices have reported less new patients and less compliance with recommendations made in the treatment phase of care. Perhaps there needs to be a return to basic communication, one to one, eye to eye, to build that doctor-patient relationship with real bonds that are not able to be shattered by the touch of a delete button. Communication via technology, while it has changed and has proven to be incredibly helpful in organizing and adding process and structure to the office, will never replace the bonds of human friendship and the strength of camaraderie and close relationships that are built between people.

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