

Using the Web To Extend Services

BY THOMAS C. LAWRY

Although 100 million adult Americans—one in every three—routinely use the Internet to communicate and gather information, this fact has gone unnoticed by healthcare organizations. True, many are launching Web sites. But only a few use those sites in a way that extends healthcare services and meets consumer needs.

One such organization is PeaceHealth, a five-hospital system based in Bellevue, WA. The system has invested a lot of time and resources in establishing a strong Internet presence—www.peacehealth.org. “Consumers have gotten ahead of healthcare providers in using the Internet,” says John Haughom, MD,* PeaceHealth’s corporate senior vice president, health improvement. “It is imperative that hospitals respond to the growing interest in online healthcare.”

Unlike most such sites, peacehealth.org goes far beyond offering static healthcare information that may or may not be of interest to consumers. Among PeaceHealth’s executives is a medical director for Internet services. This physician oversees the site’s medical content, including its “Ask an Expert” service, through which users can get online answers to confidential questions from a panel of 90 physician volunteers.

In addition to Ask an Expert and a comprehensive healthcare library that provides information about hospital services, health classes, and many other topics, peacehealth.org offers:

- A listing of system-affiliated physicians, catalogued according to their medical specialties, office locations, genders, and the languages they speak
- An e-mail service through which users can send messages to any PeaceHealth facility
- The Career Opportunity section, which not only lists PeaceHealth job openings but also



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enables users to apply for them online

- The Baby@lbum, where grandparents and others can get a long-distance look at a new family member
- Electronic cheer cards that users can send to friends and relatives

LESSONS LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

PeaceHealth’s Web site shows how this new medium can be used to advance strategic and operational goals. It also reveals the importance of effective planning and leadership. Creating a Web site that is more than the digital equivalent of a company brochure requires a high degree of planning, creativity, and expertise.

Develop a Plan To develop a strategic plan for Web services, PeaceHealth put together an organization-wide planning committee. According to Bev Mayhew, the system’s public affairs director and chairperson of its Internet Planning Committee (IPC), “We realized that it would be more effective to develop a plan that met the needs of all five hospitals than to develop five plans addressing the needs of each individual hospital.”

The IPC comprised representatives from each PeaceHealth facility, including a physician, a nurse, a librarian, public relations and marketing professionals, and representatives of the five information systems. The committee developed a plan and budget that was approved by the system’s top management group.

Ensure Top Management Support “‘Buy-in’ by top management is critical to the success of a Web strategy,” says Haughom. “Every time a consumer seeking health information clicks a mouse, he or she is sending a message to hospitals and doctors, telling them times are changing. Still, convincing top managers of this fact can be a challenge. We’re asking them to make a big investment in Web services at a time when funding for other services is flat or falling.” Fortunately for PeaceHealth, its top managers saw creation of a comprehensive Web program as

Continued on page 30

*Haughom is the author of “Moving Medical Records Online,” *Health Progress*, November-December 1999, pp. 30-32, about the creation of PeaceHealth’s new electronic medical records system.

CHALLENGES AND COMPETENCIES

Continued from page 23

show how they have been present in excellent Catholic leaders, and outline their logical importance in a Catholic organization. It is quite another thing to train and develop these abilities. Theological and spiritual abilities are as much art as they are skill. Although they include knowledge, they are not primarily about information. Training methods that work in other areas will probably be too superficial to work in this area. Also, timelines for developing these competencies will have to be correlated with many other factors, such as opportunity for reflection, exposure to crisis situations, and age. Theological and spiritual abilities do not develop in isolation or solely in sporadic educational efforts.

• Organizations need to give careful attention to how they will evaluate these competencies. The competencies of the Values cluster are, for the most part, visible and demonstrable. However, the competencies of the Vocation cluster are more interior and are often known through personal witness, the disclosure of the leader's inner life. Also, many people believe their spiritual lives are private, so organizations will have to draw distinctions between personal-private and personal-public spirituality.

As Catholic healthcare undertakes the challenge to develop leaders with these theological and spiritual competencies and the difficulties mount up, it is good to recall the vision. Catholic healthcare has an ultimate identity that relates it to the divine source. It makes sense to want that identity "up front and obvious" in all its healthcare efforts. Also, Catholic healthcare believes the human person has a spiritual identity that grounds and informs the way the person engages his or her role and responsibilities. In a faith-based organization it makes sense to bring the resources of that identity to bear on the tasks at hand. The organization's theological identity and the leader's spiritual identity work together for the health of all God's people. □

NET GAINS

Continued from page 16

a strategic priority.

Define Objectives Clearly "From the beginning, we wanted our site to be of high value to the consumer," says Mayhew. "In an era of budget constraints, however, we had to define specific measurable objectives." Management's main priorities were helping site users manage their health, increasing convenience to patients and their families, improving business processes, and extending PeaceHealth's mission.

Involve Physicians and Other Stakeholders Once top management's support is assured, other key stakeholders must be involved. At PeaceHealth, physicians played a critical role in establishing the site, setting its basic policies, and selecting and reviewing its health content. Corporate and facility human resource professionals developed the site's Career Opportunity section.

Along with internal stakeholders, PeaceHealth involved consumers in the process. The IPC, for example, included a volunteer from the community. It also conducted focus groups to help it gauge the opinions of women, older people, and other segments of the community.

Recognize That "Internet Time" Moves Faster "The Internet is a medium that is moving very quickly," says Glen Campbell, PeaceHealth's Web services manager. "It's a challenge for a large, multihospital organization to try to move at the same pace. In 'Internet time,' new ideas surface on a weekly basis. People have to be willing to move quickly." Most hospitals are not yet equipped to deal in e-commerce, for example; they will have to catch up.

Use Web Services to Improve and Extend Current Services "The entire organization should be aware of, and involved in, the Internet strategy," says Campbell. "Our Web services team does the groundwork, but the real value to the organization comes when employees use the site to provide better service to our patients and their families."

Balance Expectations against Budget "Strategic Web initiatives demand the same

careful budgeting as major capital projects or new service lines," says Mayhew. "Our Web site budget reflects a serious commitment to achieving defined goals."

Recognize That a Web Strategy Is a Continuous Journey "We see what we've done so far as a starting line rather than a finish line," says Haughom. "We'll continue to stretch both our thinking and our budget to meet consumer needs."


REDUCING THE "HASSLE FACTOR"

PeaceHealth launched its Web site in January. In coming months, patients and family members will be able to use it to:

- Preregister for hospital services (e.g., giving their medical histories before going in for surgery)
- Refill prescriptions
- Purchase over-the-counter goods (e.g., by sending flowers to a new mother)
- Receive a customized, weekly newsletter on pregnancy (A woman in her fourth month of pregnancy can, for example, get information applicable to that stage.)

In the more distant future, users will even be able to access medical records and schedule appointments through the site.

Although the creation of peacehealth.org has been complex, the goal is simple, according to Mayhew. "We just want to reduce the hassle factor and increase the convenience and pleasure factor for people interacting with PeaceHealth." □

 For more information about PeaceHealth's Web site, contact John Haughom, MD (jhaughomdr@peacehealth.org); Bev Mayhew (bmayhew@peacehealth.org); or Glen Campbell (gcampbell@peacehealth.org).

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