Teaching a New Dog Old Tricks: Web-Enhanced E-mail in Health Care

BY RICHARD L. UPTON

I magine increasing your health care organization's Web site activity by 30 percent or more simply by adopting new e-mail technology.

Imagine integrating into your organizations e-mail system graphic elements consistent with your brand identity, patient communications programs, and a means by which patients and health care professionals could link instantly to content you choose from the Internet or your organization's Web site or intranet without the technical or security burdens of

> WEB-ENHANCED E-MAIL IS BASED UPON THE AGE-OLD PRINCIPLES OF PRINT MEDIA AND DELIVERS TO ITS RECIPIENTS A BRANDED MESSAGE THAT IS PROFESSIONAL, INFORMATIVE, AND COST-EFFECTIVE.

embedding or rerouting.

Imagine if there were almost no limits to the nature and size of that content, from physician profiles and/or seminar listings to any other possibilities you could conceive … while adding less than a scant 1KB of memory to that of a plain-text e-mail message.

Imagine a patient having the ability to "click" on a referenced e-mail to receive the most current health care news, protocols, and relevant health care and patient care information

directly from the Internet, your Web site, or intranet—even from archived files.

If you think these innovations form a wish list that won't be possible for years to come, think again. They define the interactive marketing capabilities of Web-enhanced Email™—a technology that has come into its own only during the past year and that is offered by a limited number of service providers worldwide. Web-enhanced Email, compared to branded e-mail utilizing embedded and signature file solutions, is based upon the age-old principles of print media and delivers to its recipients a branded message that is professional, informative, and cost-effective. However, this new e-mail communications discipline takes advantage of advanced digital technology to create a dynamic new form of message delivery, referred to as Active Information™ that makes stand-alone Web sites and plain text e-mail seem inert by comparison.

Unrealized Potential

Most health care organizations have accepted the need for Web sites, but in a marketing sense have treated them as little more than "information repositories" that patients and health care professionals must visit and navigate at random. This thinking is typical of the fact that, for the most part, like corporate and professional services marketers, health care organizations continue to deliver their marketing messages the same way they did 25 or more years ago. The tools to produce these messages have, thanks to digital technology, changed incredibly. But the hierarchy of delivering the message remains unchanged:

■ Mass media advertising continues to take the lion's share of expense and effort, whether in print or through broadcast and cable.

- Direct marketing and public relations are the main means of conveying personalized, tailored messages.

- "Interactive" is still "out there" trying to find a settled discipline, under-appreciated, under-utilized, and misunderstood—let alone competitive with that of mass media communications.

The statistics of the communications industry support these claims. The latest *Advertising Age* breakdown of the $83 billion spent last year by corporate America's 100 largest national advertisers—presumably among the most sophisticated marketers in the country—to convey and differentiate their branding messages shows that, in the $46 billion of measurable spending, 32 percent went to print media (magazines, newspapers, Yellow Pages), while 63 percent was absorbed by broadcast and cable television. The remaining 5 percent was roughly divided equally between radio and the Internet—a big gain for the Web's share compared to several years ago, but still making it a bit player compared to print and broadcast media.

New Branding Approaches

New behaviors in the marketplace have already made such passive, traditional branding approaches obsolete. Information is growing exponentially, and its useful life constantly shortens. In such an environment, knowledge and performance—and communication—must be based on actionable, active, and interactive information rather than inert data. Inert information is static, retrospective, and dated. Active

Information™ technology makes communications—whether statistical data or text—current, accessible, and immediately relevant.

Active Information technology can ideally provide health care marketers with reach, targeted customization, and ease of functionality (in other words, ease of usability) to communicate their message. Interactive communication brings to life the fundamentals of effective marketing:

ACTIVE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CAN IDEALLY PROVIDE HEALTH CARE MARKETERS WITH REACH, TARGETED CUSTOMIZATION, AND EASE OF FUNCTIONALITY TO COMMUNICATE THEIR MESSAGE.

- Awareness leads to positive predisposition

- Positive predisposition leads to preference

- Preference leads to trial

- Trial leads to satisfaction

- Satisfaction leads to loyalty

- Loyalty leads to increased profitability

It all starts with awareness. And marketing and brand strategists have largely ignored the most powerful technology-driven, awareness-building tool in communications today, a tool that literally connects them directly and actively with each individual target for their message. That tool is e-mail.

Simply put: e-mail has eluded the scrutiny of traditional brand-strategy and business development disciplines. Two-thirds of all Americans have Internet access at work, and 98 percent of them use e-mail daily. That's 57 million e-mail users. A recent study by the Pew Internet Project shows that almost all of these users check e-mail daily, that 40 percent of them receive more than 10 messages a day, and that half of them spend up to an hour a day managing e-mail. Applying conservative estimates, 855 million e-mails

are sent daily …4 billion per 5-day work week …17 billion monthly … 205 billion annually.

That annual e-mail figure is more than the number of pieces of mail delivered last year by the U. S. Postal Service. And this is for business e-mail in the U.S. alone. Web consultant NUA.com has estimated that there are 900 million business and personal e-mail accounts in the world, and if each of them only received two e-mails a day, the total traffic would easily overshadow the 440 billion pieces of physical mail that the Universal Postal Union says are delivered worldwide each year. Any way you look at it, e-mail is the world's leading interactive 1-to-1 communication medium. Yet few corporations, professional services firms, or health care organizations apply the same effective marketing disciplines to their e-mail communications as they do to their print communications.

Few businesses would ever allow its employees to send business correspondence on plain paper in lieu of letterhead, yet that is the exact equivalent that happens every time professional communications go out in the form of a plain text e-mail.
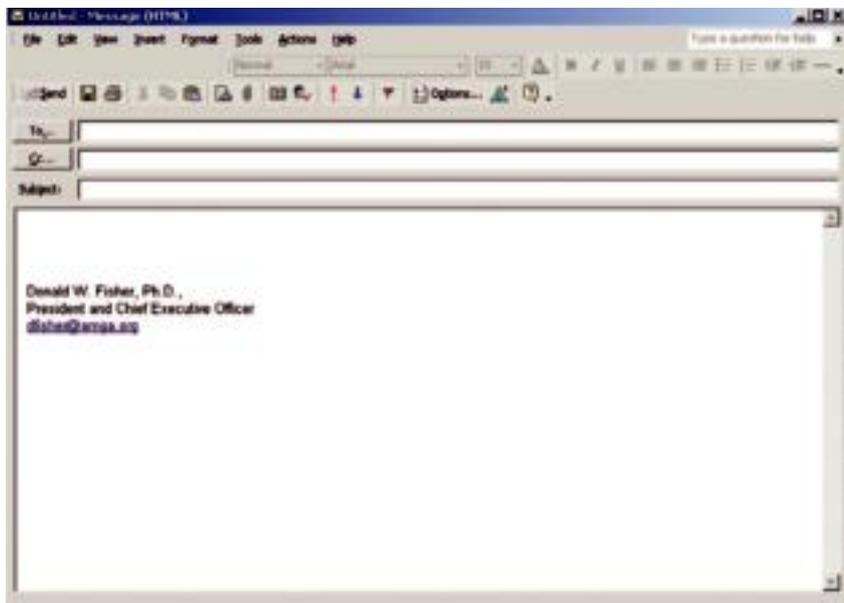
Because of our comfort with tradition and conventional processes, executive management, communications professionals, and brand strategy experts have all let e-mail escape their attention as a means of reinforcing traditional brand strategy and business development disciplines. In the health care market sector, this behavior is no less a strategic oversight than if a clinic or hospital were to run an ad, produce a brochure, or send a direct mailer promoting a seminar or service without referencing its name or logo.

This oversight is simply based on a lack of knowledge and our slavish habits of convention. The fact is that Web-enhanced e-mail providing interactive marketing messages is

Before and After: Web enhanced e-mail expands marketing and branding of the organization as evidenced by the screenshots above.

offered today by only a few providers, in a variety of solutions-driven formats. These include industry leader LetterMark™ Web-enhanced Email™ by FullSeven, a business unit of U.S.-based Research Triangle Software, Inc.; NetForce e-mail marketing communication by Netforce Development, Inc.; OnLetterhead branded e-mail; and Mailround. All offer an e-mail brand-ing solution, but with varying degrees of technological sophistication, security, memory consumption, and cost-effectiveness. Most of the providers offer their products or services at a price per user that is a fraction of the cost per message of a premium-quality engraved business card—which in turn pales in comparison to the cost of brochures, letterhead, or traditional media advertising.

The most sophisticated of the Web-enhanced e-mail products convert one-to-one plain text e-mail into a powerful marketing and busi-ness development tool that can drive substantial increases to Web site visits and increase brand awareness through such tools as digital business cards with personalized contact informa-tion, digital links to professional bios, and additional access to Web-based information that can range from "physician referral" listings to seminar schedules, press releases, brochures, health care education—the full spec-trum of branding tools integrated within the health care organization's Web site, intranet, extranet, and other Web-based destinations. Certain products, such as LetterMark Web-enhanced Email, can also incorporate digital links to news releases, breaking events stories, announcements, semi-nar registrations, patient services, and educational information, all as part of customized templates that are stored on the provider's server while never "touching" the customer's e-mail while in transit, adding no more than 1KB of weight to each e-mail, and elimi-nating virus and security threats with-out requiring changes to firewall or infrastructure architecture.

Advantages of Web-Enhanced E-mail

The advantages of Web-enhanced e-mail are obvious and considerable:

- It provides consistency of visual identity and brand message.

- It reinforces an image of technical sophistication.

- It provides value-added informa-tion to the recipient in an active, interactive format that lets them choose the information they want.

- It increases Web site ROI by delivering relevant information directly to visitors versus placing the burden of "searching" on the visitor.

- It offers measurable results by including simple Web-based reporting of key metrics, such as click-throughs and v-card downloads. The result is customized analysis of pulse, cycle, frequency, and all other keys to traditional brand tracking research.

- It is easy to implement.

- It is flexible, as templates can be customized for multiple user applications within a firm.

- It is cost-effective—several Web-enhanced e-mail suppliers offer price packages by the number of individuals using the templates at each firm, and volume discounts can apply, so the price of branded, interactive e-mails is often measured in fractions of a cent per message.

Beyond these basics, considerable technical sophistication can be built into a branded Web-enhanced E-mail™ system. For example LetterMark™ Web-enhanced E-mail™ offers a functional technology called Dynamic Republishing™, which links live Web site content through the server-based templates of the sender's e-mails. This means that the templates remain "live"—applying Active Information™ technology—even on archived correspondence, and clients can always add new information (even video-streaming downloads that regularly change) or update the information on their LetterMark templates, and all e-mail recipients—past, present, and future—will view the latest content.

Note the vast difference between Web-enhanced e-mail that does not use embedding, attachments, or signature files and a hyperlink. The

hyperlink can become dated, stale, or even broken when access is attempted from an archived file. It loses its immediacy the minute it is created. Hyperlinks, despite their high-tech connotation, are still inert data. Server-based Web-enhanced e-mail templates, by contrast, offer a completely flexible and dynamic medium that never stops communicating, actively and intelligently. Send out an event invitation by e-mailing a hyperlink and you combine cumbersome distribution list compilation with dated information. Add the latest event description to a server-based Web-enhanced e-mail template and all e-mails featuring that template—past, present, and future—are instantly updated with text and a link to the latest invitation. Thirty seconds versus a week or more of effort, interactive versus inert communication: Active Information™ defines effective productivity in today's highly scrutinized, patient-focused health care environment.

The health care organizations that survive and thrive today and tomorrow will be those bold enough to combine knowledge, performance, and communication into a single package of actionable, interactive information and patient-focused insight. Static strategies and static intelligence detract from, rather than add to, the competitive bottom line. Those health care organizations visionary enough to adopt communications initiatives based on active, interactive information will provide their organizations with the greatest patient care and patient satisfaction strategy of all—the ability to change, adapt, and grow … profitably.

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