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Is the Virtual World a Pain or a Panacea?

The blogosphere, Facebook and Twitter are without doubt fore-runners of more and more virtual living. Skip forward another century and we'll be born with the wiring embedded.

Despite conservative people's most conservative hopes, social networking and social retailing are not going away. Online existence, friendship, communications and trading continue to gather more and more momentum. Global expertise, in theory, is unfailingly on tap.

The question is: Is it safe to conduct a greater proportion of our professional lives online?

It's a vexed question. Everything we put in writing could later become a litigious can of worms. But if we opt for the complete opposite; that is, to have *no* online presence, is that the death knell to a contemporary, competent image?

Accelerating change is the constant here.

The fluid, fast-moving online world is a relatively straightforward matter for our social lives. However, there's always the worry about the blurring of boundaries; social to professional, right audience to wrong audience, formal to colloquial, appropriate to inappropriate.

However, the fact that dangers exist shouldn't shut down the creative, clever online marketing strategies just waiting to be identified.

Within healthcare and the not-for-profit and non-governmental sectors, there could well be exciting opportunities. It's a no-brainer that relationships and work-flows *within* health and community care organisations can be professionally regulated and streamlined with a tailored I.T. package such as FileVision.

Within the Health Information Technology sector, there's a broad acceptance that people should be increasingly able to access their own health records online, and that this should lead to consumer empowerment and added choice. Whether health *services* as opposed to *records* should actually be delivered online, however, is another matter entirely.

The question of how much professionals should directly engage with their patients/clients online in general, remains difficult. Where one practice/district health board/community organisation goes, others will no doubt follow. Meanwhile it seems the jury's still out.

However, there's no doubt at all that some organisations have fallen way behind with what's possible, as far as communicating with their clients and the wider world of potential clients. It happens when there's too much emphasis on internal *systems* and culture, and not enough on who the customers are, and what they need.

Many organisations could be doing more distributing of marketing information via the web. A sparsely-written factual blog, well signposted, linked and underpinned by scientific reality, can do much in the health-promotion space.

What this requires, however, is an upsurge in the concept of the 'renaissance' person. In other words, you need people heading organisations who are not afraid to be multi-dimensional. They need to be able to talk about current events from an authentic world view totally aligned with their organisation's brand, values and way of working.

One thing's certain, and that's that the requirement to have a sophisticated *virtual* as well as actual presence is only going to intensify. Embrace it. And watch this space.

Accelerating change is the only constant

- Get a piece of paper and fold it down the middle vertically. On one side write down what your customers are wanting; their common values and desires, and on the other, what your organisation actually provides. Write down the details of *how* your organisation is delivering the desired product or service. Is your brand connecting the two? ***Your brand is the whole entity of how you do business. It's far more than the colours and design of your logo. But your visual image is still one part of it.***
- Think about this question: Underlying what you do, what are the values and beliefs of your organisation? Are these values obvious? ***Is what you stand for obvious*** to your customers and prospective customers? Does every staff member know and agree with what your organisation upholds? Make it real by choosing three or four core words for your staff to keep uppermost in their minds when dealing with the public.
- Is every single staff member reminded often enough of the values and principles behind the organisation? If you'd like to lift these in everyone's consciousness, it's best to start by setting an example yourself. ***Some time to mull over, change, and differentiate what you offer is essential.*** Set aside and carefully guard some time in your diary for working on optimising what your customers encounter when they make contact with you.
- Don't be afraid to give your web site a more 'directional,' differentiated personality. That sounds like a hair-dressing term, I know. But don't be afraid of having your own cut-through-the-dross writing style. This can still be professional. But be *real* with your customers, or you'll turn them off.
- Can what you're offering be broadened out to embrace a whole lifestyle? For instance, if your business is a gym, it follows that you should be promoting health. However, if your communications somewhere allude to a staff culture of regular binge drinking, what is that saying? Something like the fact you'd like to make money via the health and fitness industry, but at the core you don't really make any valued connection with what you're promoting?

- Ensure the lifestyle component behind what you offer is underpinning your web site, stylistically. Think of the coca cola brand and youth, beauty, sunshine and beaches come to mind. If you're in the aged care space, why not find a beautifully aged face to photograph, which speaks of peace, self-respect, and grooming? Value and take pride in what you're promoting, and others will follow.
- Make it easy for your customers wherever possible. It's a complex world, so keep it simple for them. Add helpful links to your web site; ones that align with your values. Have a staff member add 'bytes' of new information from various places in the world, whenever something interesting happens in your field.
- Stay within the same medium as your customers. If they email you, email them back. If they phone you, phone them back. If they tweet, tweet back. Remember, it's all about the customer and what makes life better for him or her.