



The Net and Us

Editor's Message



By John Loofbourow, MD

WHAT THE INTERNET DOES is greatly facilitate the flow of information. If information is power, the net makes the power of information available to all. The net is a liberating populist instrument, and the operative word here is available because, like the option to vote, it must be exercised.

Manipulation of information is circumvented as users connect freely through email, blogs, browsers, and web sites. On the other hand, the advent of the net can greatly weaken organizations that rely on control, spin, or management of information - government, political parties, com-merce, "the media" and sometimes the professions, the unions, the academics, or organized religions.

Yet, these same organizations can thrive by becoming much more democratic and relevant, more connected to people who elect to join this electronic free world called, for lack of a better word, the net.

Organizations can use the net for communication with membership, and also with the wider community in which they operate. But to use the net effectively requires broad-based or horizontal power sharing rather than the usual "top down" hierarchical system. Why? Because people elect to log on; and won't do so without reason. It requires, in a word, connection - characterized by two-way rather than one-way conversation. In an online world, organizations that draw information and strength from their members can continue to prosper because, in this case, horizontal communication is power. Organizational effectiveness now derives more than ever only from an actively involved membership. Even Osama understands this, and employs email and the net.

To rephrase well-known political guru James Carvel, "It's the grass roots, stupid!"

The practice of medicine is no longer simply a one to one transaction between a physician and a patient, and won't be so for the foreseeable future. The public, the state, the industries, and the opportunists of all stripes are actively involved in medical care today, and the medical business as well. To be heard, physicians must again learn to work together, through and within an effective organization. Unfortunately, many medical societies still remain traditional top-down hierarchic bodies.

Where do these circumstances leave SSVMS?

In an enviable position. It is noteworthy that our membership has been growing very well in recent years. Careful and conservative fiscal management has us in a solid building we own, with gradually growing reserves. We have an active, efficient Executive Director and Board of Directors. We receive timely information through On Friday and often by email. This magazine is filled with the first person voices of members who write the articles themselves; we are most fortunate in our managing editor, Ted Fourkas, a former science writer for the Bee, and in our webmaster, Melissa Darling, whose on line editions of SSV Medicine make us all proud. But we can do more by using email and the net to

further improve connections with each other and the community we live in.

Using email and the net among ourselves

The advantages of e-communication are many:

1. It is economical.
2. It is very fast.
3. It is widely and readily accessible.
4. It allows any interested member to be heard by us all, easily and instantly. The sine qua non, of course, is that the members must be informed to comment well ahead of any significant decision or action by the Medical Society. That option of members - to immediately and conveniently express an opinion - makes it possible for the Executive Director, Executive Committee and Board to act with better knowledge of how membership thinks; and to proceed in accord with the majority views of members, or move to better inform other members why a less popular course of action is needed.
5. It promotes member understanding of, and tolerance for, actions or decisions of the society. A member who disapproves of a Board decision, or action, has the opportunity to be heard, and may be more tolerant of the final outcome. The essence of participatory democracy is that the minority has the right to be heard; but not the right to veto through silence. Those who remain silent hold their peace, or at least speak with some humility, when objecting after the fact.
6. It can promote wider physician involvement in the Society. Membership in SSVMS is voluntary. Therefore, it is very important that physicians consider their membership to be significant. Fifty years ago, nearly all physicians were active in our society. What has changed? I submit that it is a lack of relevance to the physician who may not see that being a part of the local medical society makes a difference in the practice of medicine. It does, but that's not always clear; there is less sense of participation. Even though physicians have many common concerns, we are divided into isolated cliques and limited interest or subspecialty groups without an inclusive and effective physician community. That is a prescription for weakness in the political and economic environment where we now need to act. E.communication can make member participation more convenient and rewarding.
7. It allows our membership to be consulted quickly and conveniently, well before any important action or decision is taken by us or by CMA. A recent example is the December posit asking members to comment on a proposed dues hike for CMA PAC to be decided by the CMA House of Delegates in March 2005. Our individual member commentary will be forwarded to them.

Using the net and email to improve communication between physicians and the greater SSVMS community

A full use of the net includes communication with the community. Though we now offer advice to the public on many medical matters we don't go far enough in asking advice. Pubic access e.communication has many of the advantages outlined above, like low cost and fast turnaround. It also can:

Help us to be less isolated, and more aware of the opinion of others. There is evidence that input from diverse sources can lead to better conclusions, according to Scientific American.

Allow us to better address public concerns, and inform people of our own views.

Permit direct communication, not dependent on the media.

Allow us to economically and expeditiously "float" ideas, both to test public opinion and to inform or promote possible proposals.

Email and the net are to communication as light is to sight.

So here are three wishes for the print and online versions of SSV Medicine in 2005:

1. That SSVMS.org is on the browser favorite list of every member. (Please be sure to keep us informed of your current email address!)
2. That members regularly log on, using this instant and convenient way to inform and be informed. (Click on to SSV Medicine to read our colleague's comments on posits, or other matters; or send your own posit suggestions to the Editorial Committee.)
3. That we continue to receive thoughtful and interesting articles from you. This is your magazine. (Remember that color pictures show splendidly online and fewer space constraints allow options like live links, more extensive references, graphs, or reviews.)

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