Exploring the Effects of Blog Visit Experience on Relationship Quality: An Empirical Investigation with a Cardiac Surgery Medical Blog Site

Su-Fang Lee, Overseas Chinese University, Taiwan
Wen-Jang (Kenny) Jih, Middle Tennessee State University, USA

ABSTRACT

A blog was created to help cardiac illness patients and their families cope with the anxiety caused by their health problems and the subsequent treatment process. An empirical study reveals that the customer relationship management practices of the blog site affect visitors’ visit experience, their relationship learning, and how these latter two variables in turn have a significant impact on the quality of patient relationship with the physician. The study confirms the value of Web 2.0 applications in knowledge-intensive domains such as cardiac surgery.

Keywords: Collaboration, Internet-Mediated Market Orientation, Medical Blog, Relationship Learning, Relationship Quality

INTRODUCTION

Web log, an online journaling service usually categorized as a Web 2.0 technology, is rapidly receiving managers’ attention as a viable vehicle for communicating important messages among important business constituencies. According to a recent survey on the state of blogosphere from a blog tracking company Technorati (Sobel, 2010), not only the numbers of blog writers and blog readers are experiencing exponential growth rates and have reached multiple hundred million entries in the tracking database indexes, but the nature of website content and the purposes of blogging have also expanded to cross far beyond the simple role of online journals as perceived a few years earlier. The level of content diversity that characterizes the blogosphere is so high that many organizations are either using or actively experimenting with blogs to establish a convenient communication platform. Some researchers even refer to blogs, along with other Web 2.0 services, as a new class of disruptive technology that promises to
alter many aspects of business decision making (McAfee, 2006; Bonabeau, 2009).

A highly specialized knowledge-intensive service industry, healthcare has long faced a multitude of problems, including rising operational costs and patient frustration. In striving to improve service quality and worker productivity, medical professionals have looked to a variety of information and knowledge technologies for powerful solutions in coping with these problems. Well-known examples of the technological solutions include automatic record keeping, patient monitoring systems, and just-in-time knowledge delivery (Davenport & Glaser, 2002; Pendleton & Hasler, 1983). Most of the efforts, however, have been focused on improving internal work practices to enhance service quality and increase resource utilization efficiency.

Whereas personnel productivity and efficient resource allocation within the healthcare institution are important internal measures of operational excellence, patient satisfaction is an important external measure of organizational success. Much research in marketing and information systems has revealed the significant impact of customer relationship management practices on customer satisfaction (e.g., Lee et al., 2006; Jih & Lee, 2010). A common finding of these studies is the central role of quality relationship in ensuring customer satisfaction. In healthcare, the lack of trusting relationship between patients and medical personnel has also been identified as a source of other perception-related problems occurring in the process of medical service delivery and consumption (Pendleton & Hasler, 1983). Since effective and in-depth communication is essential in building and nurturing a trusting relationship in general and a patient-physician relationship in particular, healthcare personnel must improve their communication with patients on important concerns regarding illness symptoms, treatment options, and other healthcare-related issues - an important task in the service delivery process. Effective communication is instrumental in forming a shared mental model between the participants, which in turn helps with reduction of anxiety resulting from the lack of information and distrust. Therefore, quality relationship is more likely to be developed through a relationship learning process driven by effective communication (Selnes & Sallis, 2003).

Among other means of communication, blog sites can be employed to provide a communication space for patients and physicians to communicate about medical concerns. In addition to posting on the blog sites information deemed useful for the patients, physicians can converse with their patients by responding to their questions. Patients can share their experience with each other and thus benefit from community support. Given the ever-increasing demand for medical knowledge and the continual advancement of Web 2.0 capabilities, it can be expected that medical blogs will continue to increase in both number and content depth in the near future. What remains to be answered, however, is the question of how effective these medical blogs are in helping patients as well as physicians improve the quality of their mutual relationship.

Based on the premise that quality of relationship between patients and physicians is a crucial foundation for an effective medical service delivery/consumption process, this research was conducted to explore how effectively our medical blog serves as a communication vehicle for enhancing relationship quality. Inspired by the literature in Web 2.0 services, information systems, marketing and consumer behavior, we formulated a research framework to serve as a conceptual guidance for further exploration of significant determinants of relationship quality. The framework links relationship quality to relationship learning, blog visit experience, and the website’s relationship management practices. An online questionnaire was constructed based on this framework. The main purpose of the research is to determine if the blog site’s customer (or patient) relationship management practice and patients’ visit experience have significant effects on relationship quality. We also evaluated the impact of the blog site’s customer (or patient)
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