

Chapter 11

Social Networking for Distance Caregiving and Aging in Place: A Case on Web 2.0 Technologies for Virtual Support

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ABSTRACT

This case examines the business development process for launching a social network targeting older adult caregivers many of whom have chronic health conditions. An older adult becomes a member of a social network called iShare-With-U.biz to monitor online one or more health conditions. He or she invites family and friends to join a private network for support in distance caregiving, staying connected in personal health management, and socializing using common social networking features. Web site design is discussed in terms of usability by older adults. Health Web sites and social networks are assessed in terms of usage by age group. Options for revenue generation are identified when taking into account free and fee-based Web site membership. The case concludes with a discussion of challenges facing online startups given rapid changes in technology, minimal barriers to market entry, and a near saturation point for Web sites with social networking capabilities.

BACKGROUND

An explosion of user-generated content is reshaping the media landscape, shattering the status quo and creating new opportunities for marketers (eMarketer.com, 2007).

iShare-With-U.biz¹ is a social networking Web site co-created by a college professor and a healthcare

professional with the intention of bringing together friends, family, and communities in the common pursuit of good health, quality of life, and aging in place. iShare-With-U.biz offers proprietary features for self monitoring, distant caregiving, and data aggregation with the objective of supporting every member in a virtual network of support.

iShare-With-U.biz was initially the brainchild of Professor Katherine Adams for staying in touch with aging parents geographically distant from her. Dr. Adams' father suffers from chronic pain

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associated with aging. Her mother plays a caregiving role often needing family support to deal with health and daily living issues. Both parents are in their early eighties, are first time users of computers, have high school educations, and have few typing skills.

Dr. Adams asked her friend and colleague, Dr. Elizabeth Schmidt, to become a collaborator in the development of a social network Web site targeting aging caregivers. Dr. Schmidt lectures and writes articles on health and wellness inclusive of healthy aging. Dr. Schmidt is a firm believer in family involvement with aging parents to maintain quality of life and promote living at home (often referred to as “aging in place”) for as long as possible. Dr. Schmidt agreed, so a small business called *iShare-With-U, LLC*, was formed.

Dr. Adams conducts research in related fields including human computer interaction and assistive technology to support caregivers and loved ones aging in place. Dr. Adams found that older adults, typically characterized as sixty years plus, are increasingly getting online to socialize and search for health information. Dr. Adams’s parents had not previously used a computer, and they are excited about the prospect of staying connected to their daughter living thousands of miles away.

iShare-With-U.biz provides a simple capability of dynamically tracking data at personal, family, and group levels. It supports a personal journal customized by the user to track one or more health-related issues. These include: digestion and sleep quality; behaviors and moods; stress and energy levels; blood pressure and pulse; vision, taste, and hearing changes; exercise and social interaction, and others. *iShare-With-U.biz* applications support “on-the-go” usage through both mobile and Web interfaces.

The user has total control over personal data gathered and shared in his or her Web space in both raw and compiled formats. A novel feature is proposed using personal data and external data sources (e.g., weather) to generate reports showing data correlations. This and other features

add personal value to the online experience and promote daily use of the Web site by members in a network of support.

Critical alerts, set by the user to appear in his or her Web space, highlight in real-time personal data that exceeds specified limits, external data that may impact personal health, and insights into journal entries or lack of them. The user may share alerts and in turn receive alerts from invited members. This feature promotes higher levels of site usage by engaging members and strengthening their online relationships.

An exciting innovation for *iShare-With-U.biz* is a proposed community forum feature whereby a user has the capability of pooling data with other community members in identifying group health trends. This engages users at a level beyond family and friends with the potential for large membership growth in both domestic and international markets.

Web Design for Older Adults

Dr. Adams has an opportunity to apply lessons learned in Web design research for older adult users taking into account normal aging factors. Figure 1(a) illustrates a data entry component of the Web site whereby a user enters sleep quality information. Most design components only require a button to make an entry. For sleep quality, pulse, blood pressure, blood sugar, and a few others, the user types a data value into the box. Figure 1(b) shows the capability of deleting an entry when a mistake is made. The user clicks on the checkbox and “Delete Selected” button. A message box is displayed to validate the intention to delete data. Then, the data value is removed. If the user has trouble with data entry or deletions, a member in his or her support network can provide assistance.

Because of usability recommendations by Nielsen (1999), Schneiderman (1998), and other experts, Web sites in general have become more user-friendly. Many Web sites meet the online needs of younger adult users. But, some do not

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