Chapter 8.4

Knowledge Sharing Online:
For Health Promotion and Community Education: e-Mavenism

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to explore the utility of online knowledge sharing for the health and human services. Experiences in marketing are used as a basis for the development of three broad and interrelated theoretical concepts—the diffusion of innovations, viral marketing, and online word of mouth advertising—as well as several other influential factors to explain online knowledge sharing. Three major elements that stimulate online knowledge sharing are distilled from these theoretical perspectives including internal factors such as altruism, online social network size, and topic salience. This chapter uses these elements to propose a model of e-Mavenism which explains the cognitive processes that lead to online knowledge sharing behavior. Based on the e-Mavenism model, several strategies are suggested for online health promotion and community education.

Tzu Hungs: Is there one word which can serve as the guiding principle throughout life?

Confucius: It is the word altruism. Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.

-- Confucius (K'ung Fu tzu 551-479 BC) replying to Tzu Hungs's question in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (2004, p.238:6).

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the World Wide Web has seen users adopt various types of Internet-based Information Communication Technologies (ICT) such as e-mail, social networking sites, and virtual communities to support social relationships and facilitate information seeking behavior. Using a diverse set of interactive online media, people communicate

and share information with each other and often recommend products and services. Ultimately the interactive, mediated exchanges of information and knowledge among people form the basis of online knowledge sharing. This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section outlines how knowledge sharing online is performed and includes examples from four major online media organizations. These organizations were chosen because of the real world context they offer. Readers are encouraged to incorporate their own past experiences with these organizations and consider how they engage in online knowledge sharing. The second section demonstrates successful applications of knowledge sharing drawn from the field of marketing, and highlights the potential for the application of this knowledge to health and human services education. The third section presents the theoretical concepts based on diffusion of innovations research including electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and viral marketing. Although the research reviewed in this chapter is derived from marketing studies, it provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding online knowledge sharing for health promotion and community education. Specific factors that contribute to stimulating online knowledge sharing are presented. The last section proposes e-Mavenism as a model for online knowledge sharing for health promotion and community education.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING ONLINE

Various types of online ICT tools facilitate knowledge sharing. Those most closely associated with knowledge sharing are interactive and often interpersonal media such as e-mail, blogs (weblogs), virtual communities, and online video sharing media. E-mail is the most frequently used online medium and has been evaluated as an interactive tool containing the most powerful potential for knowledge sharing online. For example, Fallows (2008) used national-level survey data (n = 2,251)

to investigate Internet use and found that over 60 per cent of Internet users send and receive e-mail daily. It has been estimated that in the United States alone there are well over 100 million daily e-mail users. (Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, 2005) This is a testament to how active users are in terms of mediated interpersonal communication and highlights the extent to which people are sharing knowledge and information with each other online. E-mail lowers the costs associated with communication, allows people to share information with others in their social network and affords users the power to easily disseminate persuasive messages. After all, receiving messages from friends about products, services or ideas is the core of word of mouth advertising. Given the popularity of e-mail and the potential for knowledge sharing, it is not surprising that organizations are interested in learning more about the antecedents of this behavior.

Pass-along behavior is the most representative process of knowledge sharing via e-mail and is defined as the forwarding of messages received previously (Phelps et al., 2005). This behavior is the mechanism by which people share vast amounts of knowledge and information via e-mail and can also be understood as a form of online knowledge sharing. Furthermore, knowledge sharing via e-mail among peers is persuasive. Phelps et al. (2005) found that e-mail users viewed messages forwarded by their peers as more credible than commercial messages in mass media. This is a product of the personal connection and sense of trust between senders and receivers which is absent in traditional mass media advertising.

"Blogs" are a contemporary version of traditional personal journals and are very popular. People have a long history of appropriating technology to fulfill specific goals. With regard to Internet-based communication technologies, these goals have typically been interpersonal in nature. It is not surprising, then, that blogs have also been widely adopted by users for interpersonal ends. Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright

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