

Opinion

Thumb Drumming: Can We Harness It Professionally?

When I give a talk these days, half the audience is bowing their heads. No, I have not taken up the ministry, and no, I haven't morphed into a boring speaker. The hunched ones are hunching with eyes wide open, in fact staring down at their laps, where they have hidden a BlackBerry or iPhone between the desk and their umbilicus. They are watching intently, with thumbs drumming out phonetic text free of punctuation or searching PubMed for literature that will prove me wrong in real time. It's easy for me to start feeling judgmental about this behavior, since it isn't compatible with the full and rapt concentration I seek in an audience. But then the other day I had an epiphany that maybe the e-lifestyle could lead to better patient care and a more fulfilling professional life.

I've spent the better part of 30 years in ophthalmic organizations as a professional society junkie. From the perspective of a leader, the most frustrating member behavior is apathy. It is said that 10 percent of the members in any society do 90 percent of the work. That may be OK some of the time, but when you need to mobilize the troops, apathy is a nearly insurmountable barrier. These same indifferent members are generally not apathetic when it comes to care of their patients, so what's the difference? Much has been written about the origins of member apathy in organizations. Three causes

resonated with me as being apropos of some of my colleague ophthalmologists: They may feel there is a lack of opportunity for participation; or that competing commitments don't leave any time for organizational involvement; or that what they say or think is not capable of influencing the organization.

What, you may ask, does this have to do with the e-lifestyle? The enemy of apathy is engagement. An engaged person is empowered, and in that frame of mind, ready to be an active participant. What the e-revolution has done is create a readily available tool to become engaged and stay engaged. Witness Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency. However you may feel about the election result, there's no denying the tremendous success of electronic engagement in fundraising, volunteering and local organization. And social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have seen logarithmic growth. As of March 2009, Facebook had 175 million active user accounts, and, as of a May 2009 survey, nearly 50 percent of Academy members were using at least one social networking site. In this relatively early phase of the e-revolution, people are engaging with one another primarily about their personal lives. But it doesn't require a stretch of the imagination to believe that professional networking is only a baby step away.

The logical host for an ophthalmic

professional networking site is the Academy. It is least likely to purloin the network for commercial benefit, and most likely to have vetted, relevant clinical information as core content. Recognizing that doing it right is as important as doing it at all, the Academy board is swiftly developing an e-Academy, including professional networking.

The benefit to the Academy is that members will want to be engaged, active participants in the ophthalmic community. The benefit to members is that they will feel more empowered in this environment than ever before. Finally, the benefit to patients might well be incalculable.



RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH
CHIEF MEDICAL EDITOR, EYENET