



The Changing Face(book) of Rehab

How social networking helps us connect on a more virtual level

By Arden McGregor, MA, C. Psych Assoc., CBIST

Brainworks? A rehab company...on Facebook? Couldn't that potentially constitute a breach of privacy? And wouldn't it drain valuable time away from conducting business? Those were just some of the many questions that raced through my mind the first time I thought about a Facebook presence for Brainworks. My colleagues seemed to share the same sentiments when I first spoke to them about the somewhat foreign concept of Facebook as a marketing tool.

I was slow getting into the social networking world on a personal level, choosing to quietly look in on my teenagers' Facebook pages as a way of keeping up to date with the news they were not sharing at the dinner table. That's where I learned my son had a secret admirer and my daughter had 77 virtual pets. Facebook is also where I was informed about the suspensions that took place after our last hockey brawl, and how people felt about it. In spite of how I got started in social networking, I escalated to an enthusiastic participant. Now, we have happily introduced our company to the benefits of both Facebook and Twitter.

The desire to connect, share, and communicate is universal. Social networking websites were developed to facilitate communication in new and wonderful ways, especially among those who felt and feel socially disconnected. Networks such as Facebook use an online virtual platform to both reflect and augment real-world human behaviour. Not

so long ago, whenever we couldn't meet face-to-face, our main mode of communication was the telephone. With advances in technology, devices have become smaller, portable and more powerful, with the ability to connect people in innovative and amazing ways. We are in the middle of a paradigm shift—moving away from the old-school, one-to-one communication model of the rotary phone, regular mail, fax and even email, to the present-day model of weblogs, instant messaging platforms, video chat, and social networks. Here, communication is in real time, highly accessible, and allows one too many connections at the click of a button.

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Currently, Brainworks' Facebook and Twitter pages drive substantially more traffic to our corporate website than Google searches—at a ratio of almost 2:1. We are certainly not alone in our experience. In fact, within the past month, the social networking world has been buzzing about a news article titled “Facebook Directs More Online Users Than Google,” that reported the trend toward navigating the Internet based on Facebook friends' recommendations and activities, rather than Google. The writing is clearly on the wall (pun intended!)—Facebook and its over 400,000,000 users cannot be ignored!

Being highly specialized, rehab professionals are often quite geographically dispersed, particularly in rural areas. Discreetly discussing cases, collaborating on work searches, and yes, even commiserating, are alive and well on the social networking scene. Just the other day, I carried on a Facebook conversation with a rehabilitation professional who was several hundred kilometers away, problem-solving about the lack of rehab funding for a 12-year-old boy in Smalltown, Ontario. I also recently received a Facebook message from a Brain Injury Association south of the border, looking to pool together our references in order to support vocational rehabilitation on behalf of one of their members. Facebook allows us to hang out and gab, in the virtual sense, with colleagues all over the world. As quoted by Steven Peskin, author of “Can a Medical ‘Facebook’ Help Your Plan Thrive?” social networking and its virtual boardroom can “facilitate the sharing of clinical insights and solutions to practical clinical problems in a way that promises to hone ‘best practices’ from the bottom up.”

In “Web 2.0 and Chronic Illness: New Horizons, New Opportunities,” Neil Seeman states that “social networks carry the potential to reach population groups that previously may have been difficult to reach via health education.” Carleen Hawn agrees, stating in her article titled

“Take two Aspirin and tweet me in the Morning: How Twitter, Facebook and other Social Media are Reshaping Health Care” that “using social media facilitates a client-centred approach to rehab, as it gives the client a voice that may not otherwise be heard. By opening up this readily accessible communication channel, it allows for richer engagement across traditional professional-client boundaries. Give most teens a brochure and it will be crumpled up and tossed in the garbage, but sharing information via Facebook is more culturally relevant today, and in our experience, has been well received. An early indication of Facebook’s power for us has come as the result of a posted prevention message—it was a “through-the-grapevine” report that a local teen removed the stickers from his snowboard helmet after reading a post on our site about the potential for the sticker glue to compromise the integrity of the helmet. When questioned by his peers, he advised that he had learned about helmet safety on the Brainworks fan page. Two of his friends became fans later that day.

For our firm, it really wasn’t the marketing data and enthusiasm that led to our own Facebook page; it was considering and working through potential pitfalls and developing standards to ensure operational excellence. In fact, the excitement that we had about moving forward was dampened by several concerns including that of privacy. And our concerns were not unique. The Dean of Medical Education from Harvard Medical School, Jules Dienstag, wrote, “caution is recommended... in using social networking sites such as Facebook.” In spite of the many positives in dealing with this millennia phenomenon, one must not enter a corporation into it lightly.

Whether a sole practitioner, or a large multidisciplinary firm, it is imperative that a social networking policy be firmly in place before entering into this world. Such policies need to be designed to ensure that professional members of the online community are well aware of potential pitfalls that must be avoided, including privacy issues, breach of fiduciary duty, blurring of professional-client boundaries, exposure of one’s community to competitors, etc. Brainworks has a highly developed procedural manual that we believe is essential to the integrity of our company.

Despite the sometimes awkward challenges of balancing the risks and benefits, we chose to adopt the technology and the power of social networking. Brainworks is currently building an online community on Facebook which is open to anyone to join. The walls of our Facebook fan page have been filled with a wonderful eclectic mix of playful, yet appropriate graffiti, research references, collegial posts and rehab web links. We made a conscious decision to allow open postings and fan comments. In fact, we encourage the interaction, but we do carefully monitor and regularly review all contributions to the site.

Social networking has offered us a chance to broaden our community and build awareness about who we are and what we do. In addition to sharing our own news, we share information to raise awareness about brain health and injury prevention. This allows us to get in at the very first link in the continuum of care: prevention. This is also our forum to offer hope to everyone who knows someone whose life has been touched by a devastating injury or loss.

Ultimately, it came down to making a choice: we could either resist the inevitable or we could embrace the technology, work through the bugs, and bring together a community in ways never thought possible just a few years ago. Now, having jumped aboard, we are better able to communicate with our staff who are dispersed over a vast geographical region, build broader community awareness regarding rehab issues, demonstrate and share the research we do, and maintain cutting-edge rehab practices.

After serious consideration, for Brainworks, getting onto the social network scene became a “no-brainer”. Being client-centred means caring for the individual, their well-being, their potential, and their concerns. It’s important to us and it’s the reason we work in this field. The future of Facebook and social networking sites like it will take the client-centred approach that we hold so dear to a whole new level.



About the Author

Arden McGregor is founder and Executive Director

of Brainworks, a rehab firm serving Ontario. As a Member of the College of Psychologists of Ontario, and a Certified Brain Injury Specialist and Trainer with twenty years experience, Arden’s expertise in rehabilitation is both respected and sought after. She tweets at twitter.com/BrainworksRehab, and she can be found on facebook at www.facebook.com/BrainworksRehab.