

E-commerce and HIM: Ready or Not, Here It Comes

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It's a big thing, this e-commerce revolution. The Internet has changed the way the world conducts business and many agree its influence will only grow more pervasive. HIM will not remain on the sidelines; it will certainly be drawn into the fray.

What Is E-commerce?

E-commerce is a euphemism for conducting business via Internet tools, especially the World Wide Web, and to a lesser extent, e-mail. Marketing and sales opportunities have produced a new breed of company, one that relies primarily on the Internet to solicit interest and manage transactions. These companies contrast with existing companies that essentially "Web-enable" their product and service offerings by migrating information and perhaps some business transactions onto web-based platforms, but do not truly use the Web as their primary corporate environment.

E-commerce companies get their lifeblood from the Internet and their numbers are exploding. Wall Street has embraced them and investment potential can be staggering. Take the case of WebMD, an Atlanta-based company that offers Internet-based services and information for physicians and consumers. WebMD raised millions in investment capital without ever turning a profit or even having a long track record, because it was a hot idea in an exploding marketplace. The company's recent merger with Healtheon creates a powerful, full-service Web-based healthcare entity.

Portals Into Internet Realms

A portal is an entryway to products, services, and information available through a Web site. Portals can have a general focus, such as Yahoo!, or be niche-specific, serving vertical markets such as healthcare. To date, all the healthcare portals have focused on building their content and forming relationships, concentrating on physicians and their patients. Besides some sites created by integrated delivery networks, there has been little focus on hospitals and none on hospital-based medical records.

Portals such as WebMD, HealthCentral, HealthGate and DrKoop provide a wide variety of products and services that vary by site. Generally, portals provide consumers and medical professionals access to healthcare encyclopedias, personalized newsletters, drug information, MEDLINE searches, and product offerings like prescriptions and alternative medicine.

MedicaLogic created a stir with its decision to put electronic medical records (EMRs) on the Web. At AboutMyHealth.net, MedicaLogic created a repository of the information contained in their physician office EMRs and allows patients and care providers to access this information. MedicaLogic claims to be the leading provider of this type of information by capturing a few million physician office encounters into its system. Currently there are more than 800 million physician office visits in the US each year, so there is still a tremendous number of encounters to move to web-based repositories. MedicaLogic has taken care to present a strong policy relating to security and record access.

Hospital Records as an E-commerce Commodity

Although there has been little movement toward building e-business on hospital-based medical records, it seems to be merely a matter of time. There is a growing demand for consumer access to information about diagnosis, procedures, medications and treatments. Consumers will likely begin to build repositories of their own information with newly available Web-based tools.

AHIMA indirectly supports this movement by encouraging patients to keep copies of their records for their own personal use and to create a history that may be used in future healthcare encounters. Saving paper records from multiple encounters can lead to an unorganized mess that is difficult to analyze and use, whereas electronic repositories will offer consumers the opportunity to have a computerized, fully portable alternative to an overflowing medical file.

These repositories can be structured to create a longitudinal patient record fed by the consumer. Because there has been little progress toward a unique patient identifier and consumers have few mechanisms at their disposal to track their care through different providers and encounters, opportunities abound to provide these types of services within the Internet environment.

HIM Roles

What does e-commerce mean for the HIM profession? HIM professionals should take the lead on the issues of security and confidentiality of the personal medical information found on these sites. Although today's healthcare Web sites emphasize security, our peers are not a constant presence in guiding the sites' policies and procedures. The window of opportunity for HIM professionals to make their mark and assist in development of standards for the entire industry is wide open.

In conjunction with the need for HIM input in confidentiality and security issues, there will be an increased demand for release of information (ROI) services. This can lead to increased revenue for the care sites. Observers believe that until the majority of care sites have EMR systems in place, there will be a demand for services providing copies of patient records to be converted into electronic images to populate the consumer-oriented repositories. When the use of EMR systems, including computer-based patient record systems, becomes commonplace, the demand for ROI will still exist, but it will be much easier to provide. Streamlining the processes of ROI will allow the digital interchange of record information with much less human intervention. However, when unique patient identifiers become available, it is difficult to imagine that the numerous, disparate healthcare entities will unite to provide a standardized method of access to every patient's encounters. Private, consumer-based repositories will be able to meet these needs.

Consumer-oriented repositories of digitally formatted medical records take HIM practice to a new dimension. No longer the exclusive domain of hospitals and other healthcare providers, this information will be available via the Web to anyone with log-on privileges to the repository. Once the medical record information is digitized and in the repository, patient access will open a new can of worms. The information will be available for electronic dissemination to the world if security and confidentiality aspects are not addressed in detail.

What Happens Next?

In light of the changes that e-commerce will foster, the entire healthcare industry will need to re-examine many of the basic tenets of information management, such as the ownership and control of the information. Who better to be involved in these discussions than HIM professionals?

Privacy advocates' fears will be realized if strong security and confidentiality safeguards are not formulated and enforced. These are opportunities for professionals who have taken responsibility for these issues in the past to step up and take the lead, and work toward their resolution. Now is the time to begin investigating, learning, and making contributions in these areas, so let the discussions begin.

References

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