

Unity Medical brings health care into a 'New Normal'

By Zach Hagadone

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The high-speed digital world has gone by a lot of names: the Information Age, the Digital Age, the Computer Age, the Connected Age. But Michael Boerner, founder and CEO of Unity Medical, said his company has yet another term for it: "the New Normal."

"Four years ago there was no such thing as video iPods, YouTube or television programs on the Internet. Since then, we have gone through a mass consumer behavioral shift," he said. "The new normal way consumers prefer to learn is short-form video and social networking, and that is precisely how our tools have been designed to engage."

According to Unity Medical COO Ken Holsinger, adapting to the New Normal has been especially difficult in the area of health care, where hospitals and providers are working to expand access just as physicians are struggling with regulatory issues and a sour economy.

Spun off earlier this year from Unity Media which Boerner also serves as founder and CEO, Eagle-based Unity Medical is working to push health care's transition into the 21st century with a suite of software tools that take advantage of high-definition video, user interactivity and the power of the Web.

"We're at a unique time where the holy grail of most industries is: 'How can I make something more scalable, with a better user experience for less

money and yet still differentiate my products?" Holsinger said. "[The goal] for us is to be able to bring in a scalable tool that can do the education that the doctors don't have time to do but with the face and personality of the doctor involved, and make that available when the patient is most focused."

Fresh from an award-winning appearance at the Health 2.0 Conference in San Francisco late last month, Holsinger said Unity Medical is pioneering a niche on the "bleeding edge" of what's possible in health care delivery.

One way Unity Medical is pushing the envelope is with the Journey Log, or jLog.

Essentially a package of instructional videos centered on a specific subject, the jLog allows users to access step-by-step advice or information on a range of medical topics, from whether flu symptoms require hospital attention, to what to expect before, during and after surgery.

Holsinger said the video component enhances users' experience, giving them remote access to physicians' specialized knowledge complete with a friendly face, but it also frees up doctors and nurses to concentrate on more critical needs.

"We bring our production and film backgrounds to the table to almost act in a consultative manner to come in and help define processes and tell a story about what's happening in a service line," he said. "We want to be able to connect the patient to the doctors in ways they normally aren't able to be connected."

The jLog application is currently being tested by Boise-based St. Luke's Health System, where COO Chris Roth said the technology "provides new ways to enhance the health care experience of our patients, their families, staff and physicians."

Other products developed by Unity Medical include the Smart Assessment Tool, Ask an Expert and the Wonder Bar, all of which take advantage of the company's catalog of "safe and trusted" content and blend it with interactive Web capabilities.

"We've taken the best of social networking and embedded it into our software and allowed for one-to-one commentary, one-to-a-group commentary or full-on public commentary," Holsinger said. "Anywhere where you have a high level of expertise that needs to be transferred to someone in a very user friendly, scalable way, our tools make sense."

Part of what's driven Unity Medical's development has been a trend away from destination Web sites and toward tailored, user-centric platforms, Holsinger said. Simply put, people don't have the time anymore to sift through pages of data to find what they want – the new technologies demand instant access to relevant information.

"The destination Web site days have been difficult. You have to spend a tremendous amount of money advertising it, and when you go to a destination site it's like going into a giant shopping mall but you're looking for a pair of size 10 patent leather dress shoes," he said. "I have to go through all of the candy, all of the women's clothing and all the other stuff to get to the store that sells the right shoes. Or with the jLog somebody can send me the link to just those shoes and just fit me."

"If the destination Web site is the shopping mall then the jLog is the personal shopper."

Looking forward, Holsinger envisions tools like the jLog becoming mainstream methods for knowledge delivery. Based on the high level of interest shown in Unity Medical's offerings at the Health 2.0 Conference, where the company won the audience award for best new service, Holsinger is confident there's plenty more room to innovate.

"We're still a startup, we're in the development mode and the partners we're looking for are really unique. The contracts have to be large and they have to be willing to literally sign on and make a personnel investment into this," he said. "The tools are easy, the hard part is compliance – getting people to stop using old methods that are expensive and ineffective and start using new methods."

Idaho Business Review, Monday, Nov. 9, 2009 – Page 3 of 3



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Above: Unity Medical founder and CEO Michael Boerner, at center, points out how Web-based communication applications will work in the future.

At top: Unity Medical technicians gather around a screen at the offices in Eagle and review a digital medical presentation.

