Plugging In to Social Networks

By being strategic and taking steps to manage the potential risks, psychologists are finding increasing opportunities for practice building, marketing, education – and socializing – in an increasingly electronically connected world.

For Daniel Hoffman, 31, a doctoral student in clinical and school psychology at Hofstra University in New York, being online is second nature. “I’ve done all my assignments on the computer since fourth grade,” says Hoffmann. “My cohort is the PC (personal computer) generation, and we’ve used the Internet since high school. Social networking is a natural extension.”

Thirty-five percent of adults online have a profile on a social networking site. That figure is up from 8 percent in 2005. And members of younger generations aren’t the only ones joining the groundswell. For example, Pauline Wallin, PhD, a clinical psychologist in independent practice and life/executive coach in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, has accounts on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. “I love the possibilities for both public education and marketing of psychological services on the Internet,” she says.

Since you don’t know by which online channel someone will find your practice, connecting all the places where you appear on the Web is important. In the basic information of any networking site, it’s a good idea to include the information that will lead contacts to your presence on the Web. Consider including your Web site address, blog and links to your listings in online directories or referral services.

Tracy Ochester, PsyD, of Leawood, Kansas, says that even just updating her social networking sites from time to time “gives me more visibility – makes me more searchable – on the Web.”

And even if psychologists choose not to utilize any of the social networking vehicles, it still makes sense to
understand how they work. Valerie Shebroe, PhD, an independent practitioner in East Lansing, Michigan, says she’s just taking her first wobbly steps when it comes to networking online. But she believes it’s important to keep up with those future psychologists who are running headlong into the virtual world. “Whether we participate or not, we mid- and late-career psychologists involved in training or supervision need to be prepared to help our students think through the clinical, ethical and legal issues involved in social networking,” says Shebroe.

The same is true for practitioners, says David Ballard, PsyD, MBA, the American Psychological Association (APA) Practice Directorate’s assistant executive director for corporate relations and business strategy. “Technology is changing the way people communicate with each other and that has implications for both how practitioners do business and their ability to relate to the clients they serve.”

There are a host of available social media tools with varying functional capabilities and not all of them may be right for you. Following is an introduction to three of the most popular tools.

**LinkedIn**

**Who Uses LinkedIn:** The site has 38 million members. More than half (51 percent) of users are 25-34 years old.

**How LinkedIn Works:** After creating a profile of your work skills and achievements, you can then invite other professionals to join your network. Those who accept your invitation can choose to grant you access to their own networks, thereby ‘linking’ you to an ever-widening pool of professionals. In addition to networking with a vast number of colleagues, members can poll their networks, share videos and presentations and scan or post job openings.

Dr. Wallin appreciates that social networking sites cut across demographics and areas of interest. “You can join a listserv dedicated to a particular topic. While that makes for a potentially focused forum, input is limited to the members,” she notes. “On the other hand, if you pose a question on LinkedIn, you can tap the wisdom of the entire community with their ‘ask/answer a question’ feature.”

Dr. Wallin, who also writes a marketing blog, considers LinkedIn “a great marketing tool because psychologists position themselves as experts by answering questions and connecting with others.” According to Wallin, there are lots of inquiries about communication, motivation and team building. “By answering these questions, you will get to know the people who need and want the kinds of services that you have to offer.”

Keely Kolmes, PsyD, a clinical psychologist in private practice in San Francisco, decided that she wanted to have a professional presence online when she started her private practice last year. By joining groups on LinkedIn, she says, “I’ve been able to participate in meaningful conversations while also drawing more traffic to my Web site, blog and Twitter profile.”

Dr. Shebroe appreciates the ability to get to know her colleagues better so she can help people find the support
they need. “I saw LinkedIn as another way to network with
colleagues and learn about them in a more in-depth way,”
she says. “I’m in an often transient university community
and getting to know psychotherapists across the nation
has helped me to confidently provide referrals to clients
who move on to other cities.”

**Twitter**

**Who Uses Twitter:** Some 9.3 million U.S. visitors in March
2009. Data from February 2009 indicated the largest
percentage of users are 45-54 years old.

**How Twitter Works:** Twitter relies on the “tweets” or
140 character-or-fewer information blasts its members send out
to their followers.

Dr. Kolmes utilizes Twitter strictly as a professional vehicle.
“I don’t use it to post about things like the last meal I ate,
and I do not follow my clients or friends,” she says. “I use
it to engage in professional conversations that reach a
great number of people and to follow psychology-related
news and networks.”

She also employs Twitter to build her practice, “tweeting”
when she has openings in support groups and providing the
link to her blog for more information. “Twitter is great for
announcements and brief interactions,” says Kolmes.

“I try to link to the newest materials from the [APA Practice
Directorate mind-body health] public education campaign,”
says Colorado Public Education Campaign Coordinator
Stephanie S. Smith, PsyD, a psychologist in private practice
in Erie. “I’m a mom of two young kids and I send out a lot
on parenting. I have more and more followers all the time.”
Dr. Ballard also posts on Twitter and follows other
psychologists and business professionals. “LinkedIn is my
professional network, Facebook is for friends and personal
contacts and Twitter is my channel for real-time, two-way
communication.”

**Facebook**

**Who Uses Facebook:** Facebook boasts 33 million U.S.
users and more than 200 million users worldwide. The
number of users over age 35 more than doubled last winter.
The majority (55 percent) of members are female, with the
fastest growing demographic women over age 55.

**How Facebook Works:** A contact is added once each party
accepts the other as a “friend.” Among the most popular
ways friends connect is through the sharing of photos,
leaving messages on each others’ “walls,” and drumming
up support for causes they believe in.

Privacy settings help members determine what can be
accessed by whom. You can choose to make your beach
photos viewable by your college friends and your family,
but hidden to the rest of your list, for example. Many
practitioners don’t want to be “friends” with clients at all,
regardless of how private they can keep their Facebook
profiles. A member can accept a friend request, ignore it
or send a message back to the sender without taking further
action.

Citing concerns for boundary issues affecting the client-
patient relationship, Jeff Zimmerman, PhD, a clinical
psychologist in private practice in Cheshire, Connecticut,
decided Facebook was not a good fit for him. “It opens up
parts of your life that are generally not open to patients.
This can have many unintended consequences on the
process of therapy,” he says.

According to Ballard, if a client asks to be your friend on
Facebook or contact on another site, consider explaining
the confidentiality issues and why other channels of
communication may be more appropriate. Additionally,
you may want to explore the issue further to address any
boundary issues and feelings, such as embarrassment
or rejection, that declining the client’s request may
have elicited.
“Psychologists fear [using social networking tools] because of possible ethical concerns, and I think we sometimes shortchange ourselves,” says Dr. Stephanie S. Smith. As with any professional activity, when using social media, psychologists should be attuned to possible ethical issues and take the steps necessary to manage risks.

**Boundaries.** Increasing popularity of social networks has the potential to blur the lines between personal and professional. If you choose to participate, be proactive in defining your online “brand” by regulating how much and what information is available about you online.

Before you even begin considering who can and cannot be your friend or contact on a site, you need to decide what information you want available to those searching for you. Your Web site URL (address) should be available, but do you want a business phone number viewable as well? While you may want to list your office address, avoid posting personal information such as a home address or phone number. “Like everything with the Web, be careful with what you post,” cautions Daniel Hoffman. Simply put, “If you don’t want it getting around, don’t post it online.”

**Privacy and Confidentiality.** Psychologists who use any of these tools to communicate directly with clients should discuss the inherent limits of confidentiality with clients in advance.

**Informed Consent.** When social media are utilized in professional activities, it is important to make sure that expectations are clear. For example, if clients send you a message through one of the vehicles, should they expect a response and, if so, how quickly? What are appropriate uses of the tools? For example, will you use electronic communications only for scheduling appointments and reminders, or for other purposes such as homework assignments between sessions and tracking target behaviors? Additionally, be sure clients know how to access care and what communication channels to use in case of emergency. Practitioners should discuss these topics with clients at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship, as well as any time new technologies are introduced.

**Marketing and Advertising.** Though the Internet is a different medium, the same standards of ethical practice you apply to printed promotional materials are relevant. Be sure that online communications, including those using social media, are professional in content and tone and do not include statements that could be considered fraudulent, misleading or false. Be sure to review the section on advertising and other public statements in the American Psychological Association (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, as well as any state-specific restrictions and prohibitions.

Stephen Behnke, JD, PhD, director of the APA Ethics Office, has written for the association’s *Monitor on Psychology* about applying the APA Ethics Code online. Here’s a sample of his observations:

“Rather than telling psychologists what they may and may not post, the code [of ethics] orients psychologists toward an attitude of reflection. Central to our ethics is considering how our actions are going to affect others, most especially those with whom we have professional relationships.” (Dr. Behnke’s complete column, “Posting on the Internet: An Opportunity for Self (and Other) Reflection” originally appeared in the January 2007 issue of *Monitor on Psychology* and can be found online at http://www.apa.org/monitor/jan07/ethics.html.)

“Our Ethics Code distinguishes between our professional and our private lives….The Internet is providing ample opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the private and the professional by making available in the public domain what has customarily been considered private conduct. When information moves from the private to the public domain, there is an increased likelihood of its having an effect on our professional lives.” (Behnke’s “Ethics in the Age of the Internet” originally appeared in the July/August 2008 issue of *Monitor on Psychology* and can be found online at http://www.apa.org/monitor/2008/07-08/ethics.html.)
Plugging In to Social Networks continued from page 11

(More information on setting your privacy levels is available in the article, “10 Privacy Settings Every Facebook User Should Know,” on AllFacebook.com, a Web site unaffiliated with Facebook, at http://www.allfacebook.com/2009/02/facebook-privacy.)

Because of such privacy concerns, many Facebook members choose to use the site purely as a social outlet.

“I avoided Facebook for a long time due to privacy reasons, but in the end it’s been a fun way to keep up with some friends,” says Michael E. Schwartz, PsyD, a neuropsychologist in Liberty, New York. His privacy settings allow only his friends to view his profile page. In fact, Schwartz says that he sets the privacy settings so high that he cannot be found even if someone searches for him via his email. “And whenever there is the possibility of adding a new friend, I look through their list of friends to limit the friend/patient contact,” adds Schwartz. “If there’s overlap, I don’t ‘friend’ them.”

It’s also possible to use Facebook solely as a professional networking tool, notes Dr. Ballard. For example, fan pages or groups are popular means of connecting with other members interested in a particular issue. A practitioner can provide a large audience with information and links to resources without having to accept members of that audience as friends with access to the practitioner’s complete profile. Other professional uses of Facebook could include using your profile page as an online directory listing, extending the reach of your blog and promoting events, speaking engagements and public education activities.

“What is important with any social networking vehicle is that you decide in advance how you want to use it,” explains Dr. Ballard. “That gives you a frame by which to evaluate your activities on the site. Being strategic about how I use social media helps me maintain appropriate boundaries, manage risks and use these tools most effectively.”

2 http://press.linkedin.com/
5 Twitter Traffic Explodes... And Not Being Driven by the Usual Suspects,” http://www.comscore.com/blog/2009/04/twitter_traffic_explodes.html