Networking — online focus groups for pharmacy’s new professional body

In the 21st article on the new professional body for pharmacy, Sadia Khan, senior professional support pharmacist at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, gives an update on the online focus group project.

Networking is an important professional tool. It is a focused way of developing and building a group of professional contacts who can serve as friends and resources during a career. In pharmacy, professional networking is extremely important as contacts can help each other to develop professionally and open doors to new and exciting opportunities.

For most pharmacists, networking currently takes the form of face-to-face engagement, eg, at meetings, conferences and events. However, the new professional body will soon be offering members the opportunity to meet other professional contacts both face to face and online via virtual networks.

A professional body website project aims to deliver a number of online interactive member services, including focus groups, local practice forums (LPFs) and mentoring groups. Using the website as a platform, members will be provided with 24/7 access to information and two-way communication (to information and two-way communication (Pj, 3 October 2009, p361).

There will be a progressive — but not total — move from traditional face-to-face meetings. By improving accessibility to online member services via the web (eg, webinars, event registration) members will be provided with more choice and more opportunities to network.

Professional networking will be delivered through different types of online pharmacy network groups, of which online focus groups is one (see Figure 1).

Web-based technology

The Transitional Committee prospectus published in November 2008 highlights that the new body “will look for new ways for pharmacists to come together. For example virtual communities will be created through web-based technology, so that pharmacists can exchange experience and knowledge easily, wherever they are.”

The online focus groups will be accessible to individuals and groups of pharmacists in any geographical location across Great Britain. They aim to offer members with an interest in any area of pharmacy practice a simple and effective way to communicate and share ideas with each other, for example awareness and publicising of events, news, alert messages, the dissemination of best practice and general discussions.

Development of pilot

The development of pilot online focus groups is now well under way. In collaboration with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the pilot is researching and developing specific member requirements for online focus groups, including group structures, design and layout that meet user needs and simple navigation. So far we have: liaised with members on user requirements and developed an early prototype for online focus groups based on member needs; set up a steering group to provide ongoing feedback on future member requirements; and initiated phased roll-out (September–December) of the prototype to different test groups, eg, the Secure Environment Pharmacists Group, the Industrial Pharmacists Group committee and the Society’s Qualified Person assessors.

The next steps include: analysing feedback from pilot and refining user requirements; making final amendments to the prototype during December 2009; developing communications and rolling out to a wider range of groups in January 2010; and the steering group will be driving user developments for later phases.

Preliminary feedback from an online focus group user survey indicates that most people have found the prototype easy to access and navigate their way around. We have also received some useful suggestions for improvements.

Cathy Cooke, chairman of the Secure Environment Pharmacists Group, has been involved since the early stages of roll-out. She reports: “Pharmacists working in, or responsible for, prisons and other secure environments often have little or no direct contact with other pharmacists working in this specialist area. We currently only have an e-mail contact group.

“An online focus group, with the added functionality that it provides, will be a valuable asset to allow pharmacists to share information and expertise and support each other in this rapidly developing professional sector.”

In terms of other online professional networking services, members will be able to search for and set up an LPF and access details of LPF local events and group meetings (see http://pharmacyplb.com/lpf.aspx).

Mentoring groups will also be available online for mentors to network with each other and share ideas about how they will offer support to mentees. (For more information on the mentoring service, see pharmacyplb.com/mentoring.aspx and Pj, 21 November 2009, p568.)

Central log

The new professional body’s online network services will also be integrated with the new membership database — a system that provides a single, up-to-date set of members’ contact details and a central log of member engagement with services. This will enable the professional body to store members’ interests and preferences to ensure they are receiving information that is relevant to them.

Further information

The online focus groups will offer a new way for members to connect with each other and tap into the new professional body’s resources using unique and innovative ways. For more information on the focus group pilots, contact Sadia Khan (tel 020 7572 2537, e-mail sadia.khan@rpsgb.org).