

Nutrition Software and the Internet: How they will Impact You

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AS THE NEW MILLENNIUM BEGINS, we notice two distinct trends: computer software applications have become essential tools for professionals in virtually all occupations, and two the Internet has become the most promising new playing field for business development. Every industry and every individual will be affected by these enabling technologies. And nutrition professionals will be no exception. If you are in business, there really is no excuse for not working a web site. Hundreds of nutrition professionals are already doing business on the Web and thousands more are preparing their debuts. Even if you don't join these professionals, you won't escape their impact - the tight coupling of today's nutrition software applications with the World Wide Web will be felt around the world. Given this reality, you should at least understand what's happening and how it will affect you and change the way you do business.

Not interested in the Web and what dietitians are doing on the Web? You should be - a new breed of web-enabled dietitians are working night and day to take your customers away from you. And if that weren't bad enough, your own customers are shopping the Web and searching for these new services! This new way of doing business is going to affect the number of customers you have (or keep). It will affect the nature of the work you do for your customers. It will affect how much work you get, how much you charge for your services, and how fast you deliver. It will affect the psychology of your client-professional relationship. It will bring you more potential customers than you can imagine... and more competition than you had ever hoped for. Today's dietitians will see their web sites as assets. Tomorrow's dietitians will be conspicuous by their absence. And when you finally take the plunge, you'll join others of your ink in a "struggle for notice" in an ever-expanding and ever-improving universe of nutrition and fitness-related web sites.

Your Web-based competitors will take your customers. Nutrition professionals and computer scientists are developing web sites connected to web-friendly software that allows these businesses to provide certain types of services and products very efficiently. These companies will likely offer these specialized services more competitively, quickly, and to a larger audience than you can. They'll take your business from you because they'll be good at delivering their specialized service better and at lower cost than you can. This will be due in part to economies of scale (it's cheaper per unit to do a thousand assessments than it is to do one or two). They'll take your business because they'll create or use web-friendly nutrition software applications to provide these services. Many web sites are already offering services at little (or yikes! no charge). The Web is alive with "ideal" body weight calculators, BMI calculators, calorie expenditure calculators, assessment report generators, etc. As these and other more sophisticated services flourish, they'll eat into your business... unless, of course, you happen to be prepared to join the trend.

The Internet, properly integrated with the capabilities of today's computer nutrition applications, will significantly broaden your potential customer base. Today, there is no need to limit your customer base to a five-mile radius from your office. By tailoring your nutrition software to generate the services you provide over the Internet, you can win customers from the other side of the world. The key is to provide a service that is valuable and needed and to deliver

it to the customer quickly. What you will normally deliver is a report of some sort. A report can take the form of a recipe, a three-day intake, an assessment, or an exercise prescription. The most efficient and inexpensive delivery method for a report is electronic. Since reports will be the most frequent end product you will generate, look for nutrition software packages that fully support electronic delivery. Some of today's high-end nutrition software will let you save these reports as a text file (for including in the body of an email message), a word processor file (that you can attach to an email message to the client), or as a web page (specially generated for the client that you post for say, 48 hours on your web site).

Worldwide competition and modern nutrition software will lower your per-client fee (not necessarily a bad thing) and increase your number of clients (not necessarily a good thing).

The web will bring you great opportunities. But the intensifying competitive environment will also force you to sharpen your pencil like never before. You won't be able to charge as much as you might like because you'll find a dozen other web sites offering similar services at very competitive rates. But that's not necessarily bad - \$5 times 100 is more than \$50 times two. The bottom line when competing on the Internet is that you have learn how to deliver greater value, at lower price, with greater efficiency. The luxury of taking a day to produce a three-day intake report disappeared when nutrition analysis software came into the picture. To compete in today's environment, you must be able to produce that same intake report in 30 minutes or less. You can't do this by grinding it out on paper, typing it up, and mailing it to the client - you must use a high-end nutrient analysis package designed to produce reports suitable for electronic delivery. In addition to this software proficiency, you must learn to use the Internet to attract customers, collect information and payments, and to deliver the goods. But the rewards can be great: today's technology can help you do more work, charge less, deliver quicker, and move on to the next client faster than ever before.

The Internet will impact the nature of your relationship with your client. You may come to miss that one-on-one closeness you've developed with some of your favorite customers. But don't despair. Working the Web can bring you closer to many more people than you would ever come into contact with in a more traditional world. As anyone who's ever worked the Web can tell you, you'll eventually develop friendships and relationships that are based on your interactions and conversations over your email channel. Many of these relationships will be as rich and as rewarding as some of your more conventional friendships. And by providing periodic follow-up service through newsletters, articles, recipes, meal plans, exercise prescriptions, etc. at no charge or low charge, you'll keep yourself positioned for providing additional services and getting even closer to your clients.

You will become engaged in a "struggle for notice" on the World Wide Web. The Web is basically the electronic primeval soup of the Internet. In it, evolution occurs not over millennia, but over days. The Web will continually shake out new winners and new losers. This is a conflict that is raging now and will never end. But it will intensify as new players join the fray. So-called "established" web sites will fall. Startups are always welcome. Sometimes they stir things up for a while, sometimes they turn out to be blips. The fittest web sites will survive. And it won't necessarily be the biggest and best-funded that survive. Clothes retailer Boo.com burned through 115 million dollars in 15 months before shutting down earlier this year (although they may be resurrected by the time you read this).

You can establish your own personal niche if it is well-defined, professional, reputable, honest, and provides real value for your audience. You don't need a million customers - just a couple hundred loyal customers will keep you in cocktail onions nicely. The key is to make your

site worth visiting and getting users to return. This is called "stickiness," and it is achieved in a multitude of ways. Some nutrition professionals do this by providing articles of interest (mayohealth.org, intelihealth.com), a recipe makeover of the week page (thriveonline.com), questions to customer's nutrition-related questions (www.dietitian.com), or with a newsletter that titillates the reader and then offers to link them back to your web site for more.

First we shape our technologies, then our technologies shape us. If you're not using nutrition and fitness software, you're charging too much, losing too much business, doing less accurate work, and working way too hard. Very robust high-end nutrition software is here, is available, and is becoming increasingly Internet-friendly. Select a package that can produce reports that can be saved in text, word processor, or web page formats. Today's assertive new nutrition software applications and their efficient coupling to the Internet will impact you like nothing else in the history of dietetics. If you're not working the World Wide Web, you're shutting yourself out of a worldwide audience of unprecedented magnitude. The simplest of technologies (HTML mark-up language and image editors) and your excellent content are all you need to create engaging web sites. Your fellow dietitians are rushing to exploit the emerging opportunities on the Web. The impact will be profound... and you'll either *make* it happen, *watch* it happen, or stand around a few years from now scratching your head and *wondering* what happened.

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