



Expanding Its Reach

By Bob Keaveney, Editor- Physicians Practice Magazine

If there was a radio station dedicated strictly to physician-oriented content, 24/7, would you listen? Ten years ago the idea would have been economically impossible. But that's changed. The emergence of satellite radio has made it possible to broadcast nationally to narrowly defined groups. The satellite-radio listener can now choose programming aimed at long-haul truckers, Martha Stewart wannabes, and fans of 80s hair bands, so why not docs?

Why not indeed, says Gary Epstein, the former head of marketing at the AMA who two years ago became CEO of ReachMD, a young company that broadcasts programming to physicians on XM Satellite radio, and through its Web site and iPhone applications.

Privately held, investor-backed, and for-profit, ReachMD is a medical education, information and communication company designed by docs for docs and other medical professionals, Epstein says. Its programming includes a mix of CME-accredited clinical content, healthcare news, politics, non-CME clinical topics of interest, and sponsored programs.

Why am I telling you this? Because I think the prototype for communicating with physicians is changing, and the Chicago-based broadcaster is one company whose experiments with different messaging models will be instructive. Research suggests that you're responding to communication styles that are less didactic, more interactive, and provide information in shorter formats. Like members of many industries, you're looking for ways to connect more with one another in a digital, asynchronous environment. You're thirsty for information now more than ever. But you don't have much time for long, ponderous articles and seminars. You want information that's focused on you, and that gets to the point. I'm by no means declaring satellite radio The Future. Whether it can ever be profitable is an open question, and there are real doubts about its long-term viability. The company that owns ReachMD's XM satellite platform, Sirius XM Radio Inc., is in heaps of debt. But like the Internet, the satellite medium does have the power to extend communication to specific audiences that are not physically present.

ReachMD's weekend coverage, for example, is wall-to-wall CME, delivered, like most of its programming, in 15-minute nuggets. Each program offers a quarter-credit of CME, redeemable online. Doctors won't learn the latest complex surgical techniques in such a short amount of time, but Epstein argues that physicians are looking for opportunities to pick up a credit or two in their spare time. Since his days poring over market research in the AMA's marketing department, he's understood that physicians are impatient. They want information quick. The days of a 90-minute podcast adapted from a conference those aren't getting downloaded because they're long, and they're kinda boring. Docs love the short format. (*Disclosure: A sister company of ours, CME*

LLC, is one of the providers of CME content to ReachMD.)

But is anyone out there actually listening? It aint ESPN but independent research indicates 280,000 listeners tune in to at least a quarter-hour of programming weekly on the ReachMD radio station, which went live in April 2007; of those, about 90,000 are MDs or DOs roughly one in 10 U.S. physicians. Most of the rest are nurses and midlevel providers.

Its content can also be accessed for free via its Web site and iPhone applications. Since it began posting its 15-minute CME-accredited podcasts about a year ago, 32,000 physicians have downloaded them. Its first iPhone application, which enables CME redemption, was downloaded some 60,000 times. About 4,200 people downloaded its more robust version during its first week of availability in June, even though the company hadnt announced its release.

Were getting buzz, Epstein says. The marketing community theyre looking for innovation. In a down economy, weve seen pretty good growth in revenue. Still, dangers lurk. What happens to ReachMD if the satellite radio medium fails? Will the iPhone (and, soon, other smart phone) applications and the Web render satellites viability moot? I dont know. But I do know that the world of physician communication is changing quickly. And this change unlike, perhaps, other shifts in healthcare is one whose shape will be directed (mostly) by you.

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