



Communications Technologies – the Industry Step Child to the PHR? *By Janice Young - March 7, 2008*

Amidst the market hoopla last week at HIMSS of Google's formal entry into the healthcare market with the GoogleHealth PHR were other significant announcements focusing on what may be considered more mundane healthcare initiatives – consumer communication strategies. In particular, Silverlink Communications released two announcements in the past two weeks reflecting the next generation of healthplan investment in communications technologies. On February 19, Silverlink reported significant growth in 2007, ending the year with reported business among 9 of the top 10 healthplans. On March 4, Silverlink announced their new Adaptive HealthComm Science Platform. The Silverlink platform integrates decision support and analytics to create personalized customer communications and to then track communications success and affect on customer behavior.

While the market has focused on PHR strategies, with little adoption, consumer communications strategies and technology solutions in the past few years have quietly, but notably, shifted from basic Plan Description and EOB data to cost, care and quality management topics. These include, among others: health and wellness programs, care management, cost management (in the form of prescription drug purchasing advice), coordination of benefits, and in some cases, services scheduling and test reporting.

The successes and opportunities of new communications tools from Silverlink, Varolii and others are largely unheralded, yet good cost/benefit studies exist. Health plans have found the return on investment and report that automated communications programs improve prescription drug cost management and increase COB information to health plans.

The next frontier is communications to enrollees to improve compliance with health, wellness and disease management programs. PHR and Internet initiatives are frequently at the heart of these discussions. However, unresolved HIPAA compliance, security challenges and low PHR adoption rates suggest that general market adoption of PHR and related Internet initiatives is at least some years away. In the meantime, communications solutions are emerging that not only deliver information to consumers, but track whether information is acted upon and what type of information delivery and timing works best for what type of consumer.

Health plan consumer communications initiatives are not a one-size-fits-all strategy. Telephone, paper, internet, integrated PHR will all have a place in the future model, but different consumers will respond differently to different media. Targeted multi-channel communications tools can both improve healthplan costs and quality in the short term and also provide insight into consumer segmentation and behaviors that will be invaluable to managing the emerging consumer communications and information management platform, include PHR deployment and adoption.