

Online Coaching

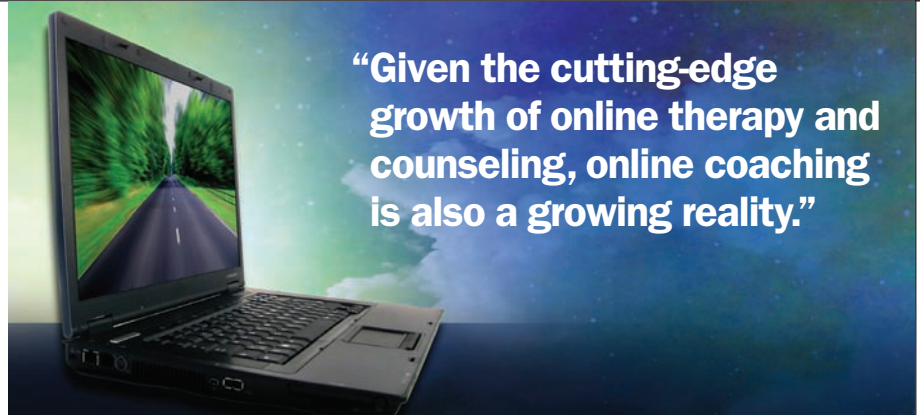
The next step in technology and client service

By Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC

Do you tweet? Do you use Google Talk? Do you have a profile on Facebook? LinkedIn? Do you instant message? Do you Skype?

Each of these social media platforms offers coaches new ways to communicate with our clients in the rapidly evolving online world. As the ways in which we can communicate online become more common and available, so do the ways in which we can offer our services to and connect with our clients. The new technology might also give coaches access to younger clients, for whom online life is a given. Without this new technology, we might not otherwise be able to connect with client populations who can benefit from our services.

Back in 1996, I became excited about the prospect of coaching by phone, which allowed me to live where and how I wanted, and to have paying clients who lived somewhere else. I had been coaching executives since 1990 in their offices as part of my psychology/consulting business. But the convenience of telephone coaching was exciting and was a service I could not ethically provide to therapy clients in my psychology practice (at least that is what I thought). Since then, the various ethical bodies (American Counseling Association, American Psychological Association, and so on) have recognized phone-based therapy and online therapy as new service methods for many therapists and clients. However, there are still some debates occurring as to how to do it and remain ethical.



The reality of online coaching is even more exciting than the jump to telephone coaching. Given the cutting-edge growth of online therapy and counseling, online coaching is also a growing reality. Most coaches, of course, communicate with clients via email between sessions, but not as the primary method of delivering coaching. Yet our younger clients are used to chatting, Twitter, text messaging, so online coaching can be quite helpful and strategic. Online counselors charge either a monthly retainer and include an upper limit of message responses, or they charge by the transaction. Could this evolve as a strategy in delivering coaching as well?

Counseling and therapy are delivered online both synchronously (in real time) and asynchronously. Examples of synchronous methods are phone, video conferencing, Skype and live chat. Examples of asynchronous methods include email, forums, bulletin boards or posted questions on a web-based medium. If you have spent any time at all on Twitter, you will have noticed that a lot of therapists, life coaches and business coaches are using the medium to promote their services. Even Tony Robbins, one of the most well-known coaches

in America, is on Twitter (twitter.com/tonyrobbins).

Coaches and therapists, like marketers and personal trainers, have been among the early adopters of new technology as a way to generate business and connect with clients. While Twitter poses very specific limits on communication (140 characters, including spaces and punctuation, per message), other media are less restricting and offer more direct communication. With Skype (and Google Talk for those who use Gmail), we can even communicate face-to-face to anywhere in the world via free video phone service. Be aware, though, that while Skype is confidential, social networking tools like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are not – they are viewable by others and are on the World Wide Web forever!

Ethics of Online Coaching

With new technology comes new risks. We have all heard about various banks and retailers who have had their computers hacked, thereby compromising the privacy of their customers. We need ethical standards and practice standards for how we conduct ourselves in the online environment. The International Coach Fed-

“For quick check-ins between phone sessions, Twitter, Facebook and other online platforms offer us new ways to connect with clients in real time.”

eration has ethical standards all coaches should follow, and this is no different for online coaches. In fact, we also need ethical standards around the use of technology.

Please check out the Online Therapy Institute (www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com) created by my friend and colleague DeeAnna Nagel for a complete code of ethical standards that apply to online therapy, and are equally important to online coaching. The following list of considerations we need to take into account for the use of online technology in coaching is accessed from the Online Therapy Institute site.

Technology basics are required for practitioners who choose to deliver therapeutic services via technology. Practitioners will possess a basic understanding of technology as the technology relates to delivery of services:

Encryption: Practitioners understand how to access encrypted services to store records and deliver communi-

cation. Records storage can be hosted on a secure server with a third-party, stored on the practitioner’s hard drive utilizing encrypted folders or stored on an external drive that is safely stored.

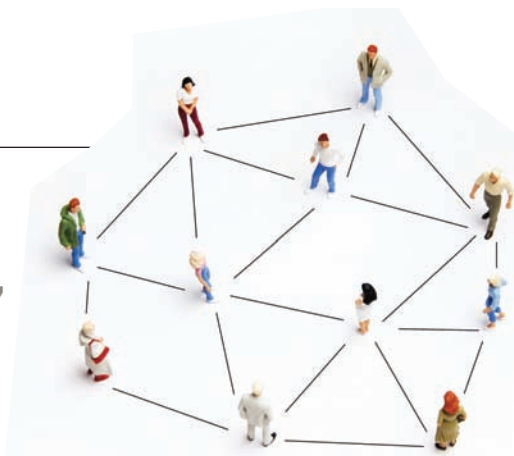
Backup Systems: Records and data that are stored on the practitioner’s hard drive are backed up either to an external drive or remotely via the Internet.

Password Protection: Practitioners take further steps to ensure confidentiality of therapeutic communication and other materials by password protecting the computer, drives and stored files or communication websites.

Firewalls: Practitioners utilize firewall protection externally or through web-based programs.

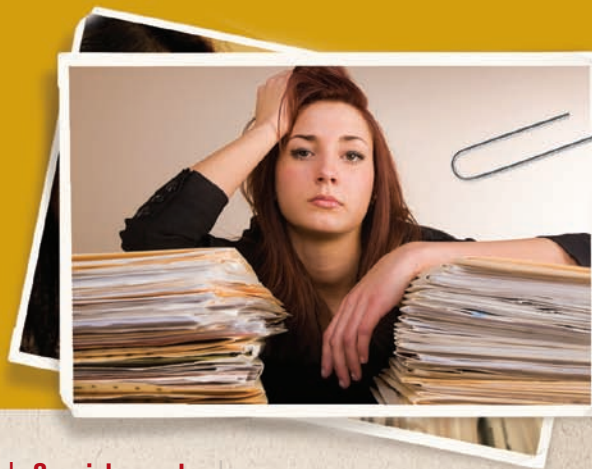
Virus Protection: Practitioners protect work computers from viruses that can be received from or transmitted to others, including clients.

Hardware: Practitioners understand the basic running



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platform of the work computer and know whether or not a client's hardware/platform is compatible with any communication programs the practitioner uses.

Software: Practitioners know how to download and operate software and assist clients with the same when necessary to the delivery of services.

Third-party services: Practitioners utilize third-party services that offer an address and phone number so that contact is possible via means other than email. This offers a modicum of trust in the third-party utilized for such services as backup, storage, virus protection and communication.

As you can see, there is a lot of technology information we need to take into account if we want to make use of online coaching. If all this is too complicated, we can always hire an information technology consultant to make sure we are compliant with these guidelines. Above all else, the privacy and safety of our clients' information must be a priority, so these guidelines are not to be taken lightly.

Conclusions

The internet has become ubiquitous since I started full-time coaching, and the use of Skype – as well as social networking protocols like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn – make it possible to have both synchronous and asyn-

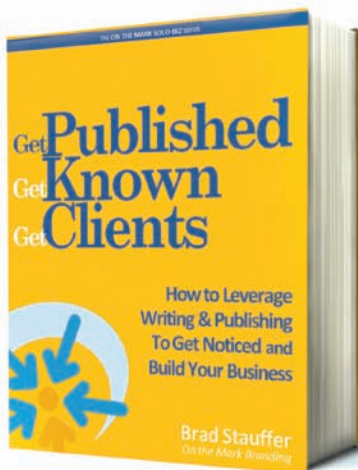
chronous “conversations” with coaching clients. However, only Skype is confidential and private. There are also web platforms that have been developed within large companies where coaching and counseling (depending on what the client wants and needs) can be web-based.

Ideally, we will want to utilize more long-form media, such as phone sessions or face-to-face conversations on Skype or Google Talk, which allow us to work more in-depth with clients. However, for those clients who prefer more abbreviated work, or who want quick check-ins between phone sessions, Twitter, Facebook and other online platforms offer us new ways to connect with clients in real time as well as through asynchronous messaging. The more ways we can connect with clients, the greater the benefits they can obtain from our services. Above all, we have a responsibility to fully understand the benefits and risks that come with new web-based technology so we can best serve the needs and interests of our clients. I recommend the book *Therapy Online: A Practical Guide* by Kate Anthony and DeeAnna Merz Nagel.

What do you think? Do you provide online coaching? Have you increased your presence with clients through distance coaching? I look forward to your comments (I will also post this on my blog at www.lifecoachingblog.com). •

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