

Memo: HEALTH—Critical domain for PAC users

Current situation:

The benchmarks framework for libraries should include the health domain (also referred to as health and wellness). Since the initial implementation of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, part of health care reform, the federal government has made a commitment to reach more Americans online with the establishment of the consumer website, www.healthcare.gov. They recognize the need to provide transparency among Americans regarding insurers and health laws. The basic premise of health care reform will be to ensure that all Americans receive basic coverage with an emphasis on preventative care.¹ As a result, this will directly influence how Americans use the Internet in public places, especially libraries, as they navigate online health resources for health coverage and basic health information.

US IMPACT Survey Report

Access to computers and the Internet in public libraries offers patrons the opportunity to improve critical aspects of their lives— health and wellness. According to the US IMPACT survey, 37 percent of PAC users engaged in health activities.² The report found that patrons used PAC for a range of health related activities and outcomes (appendix: figure 29) including researching an illness, finding information on healthcare providers and medication, and following through with lifestyle changes (e.g., diet and exercise).²

Not only do patrons using PAC find information for themselves, but more than half (56%) of health PAC users searched for health information on behalf of others. The demographics for health PAC users who rely most on computers and the Internet for health include people from lower income and impoverished households; people who speak languages other than English at home; those aged between 45-64 years old and women.

Libraries have the potential to collaborate and integrate the goals of government agencies by providing opportunities to promote health campaigns at the library and reach a larger audience. The US IMPACT study team incorporated activities into their survey from the goals of Healthy People 2010, (e.g., diet and exercise habits) developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This type of collaboration is less formal, but serves a dual purpose to support federal initiatives for a healthy America.

Review of the Literature

From the literature on health information seeking, a national survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project measured several online health activities similar to the U.S. IMPACT study. Pew cited the following activities among others as key topics searched by Internet users: pregnancy and childbirth, managing chronic pain³, and caring for elderly or disabled persons.⁴ This range of health topics highlights the value of the health domain for PAC. Patrons frequently add to their knowledge by conducting searches on health topics where they must evaluate information in order to make informed decisions about their health.

Not only are people looking for information on the Internet, but they are also contributing to the information available. The Pew research found that more patients are taking to social networking outlets to write blogs about their health conditions and the obstacles they are facing. These people have been referred to as e-patients.⁵ E-patients hope that others in similar situations might find their posts meaningful as they often use social media tools to both post and search through consumer reviews for hospitals, doctors and patient-created videos about healthcare. This gives e-patients a different perspective that often supplements the doctor-patient relationship. People find it empowering, as sensitive health topics are typically kept private. With the Internet, patients have found a source of comfort by building an online community or support group for those with similar experiences.

Concluding Statement:

There is a need for a greater focus on PAC dedicated to health and allocating additional time and training for patrons to successfully identify, evaluate and use health information. With the national reform on health care, Americans will depend more heavily on the Internet for health information, which is why of a separate health domain for the benchmarks is crucial.

Given that the benchmarks are still in development, the addition of the health domain would merely supplement the already existing key domains of employment, education, and e-government. It may appear as though health and e-government fall under the same umbrella. However, the difference between health and e-government domains is that e-government assists patrons who use the computers to fill out health forms and apply for financial assistance, whereas the health domain is used to navigate, search, and share health and wellness information for patrons and on behalf of others.

Overall, having libraries support health as a key domain for PAC will enable patrons to be more informed and empowered to make the best health decisions for themselves and their families, ultimately creating healthy communities.

Bibliography

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d). HealthCare.gov. (website). Retrieved from <http://www.healthcare.gov/>

² Becker, Samantha, Michael D. Crandall, Karen E. Fisher, Bo Kinney,Carol Landry, and Anita Rocha. (2010). *Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries*. (IMLS-2010-RES-01). Institute of Museum and Library Services. Washington, D.C.

³Fox, Susannah and Kristen Purcell. (2010, March 24). *Chronic Disease and the Internet*. California Healthcare Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Chronic-Disease.aspx>

⁴Fox, Suzannah. (2011, February 1). *Health Topics*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/HealthTopics.aspx>

⁵Fox, Suzannah (2009, September 18). *Patient Choice in Health Information Technology*. Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology. Retrieved from

Appendix:

Figure 29: Health and wellness activities by availability of alternative access

