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The following article is the first of a two-part series published on YourBiz on May 21, 1998. YourBiz was purchased by The Journal of Financial Planning. Authored by Kip Gregory, this article offers tips on how to spend your time online efficiently.

How to Make the Most of Your Time Online - Part One

Let's kill two birds with one stone. You're here for tips on how to manage your practice better and ways to leverage technology to improve your business results. Two tools will help you do both: CompuServe, together with a good off-line reader. (A quick disclaimer: I have no financial interest in products mentioned).

Some quick history: CompuServe (www.compuserve.com) is the grand daddy of "content providers," what the forerunners of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were called until recently. Others in the category include America OnLine or AOL (www.aol.com), The Microsoft Network or MSN (www.msn.com) and Prodigy (www.prodigy.com). With the Internet's explosive popularity, all now offer Internet access in addition to their own proprietary information -- in effect becoming "enhanced" ISPs.

CompuServe pioneered the "online community" concept over 30 years ago. Today's Internet newsgroups are variations of these forums, but they often lack the meaty dialogue and library resources found on CompuServe. CompuServe is now owned by AOL, whose stated intention is to maintain CompuServe as the premier online service for small business subscribers.

So, why use it? Because there is no better single source of information on subjects of interest to your clients and strategic partners, business management issues, hard and software technical support and almost any other topic you can imagine. Most of the information "gems" are found within CompuServe's 700+ forums, which cover a wide variety of subjects (you get to a forum by typing its "GO" word once you connect). Think of these forums collectively as a world wide intranet for entrepreneurs.

Here are three ways to use CompuServe as a powerful practice management tool:
1. To understand and discuss issues currently facing your strategic allies: attorneys (GO LAWSIG) and accountants (or GO ACCOUNT)
2. For tips on successfully building a business -- yours or your clients' (GO BUILDBIZ).
3. For some of the best help on marketing and public relations available anywhere online (GO PRSIG)

One caution: be stingy with your time online. Like the Internet, it's easy to spend hours browsing CompuServe's different subjects. Subscriptions (after a 30-day free trial) are available in two flavors: basic ($9.95 per month for the first five hours of access, $2.95 per additional hour thereafter), and unlimited ($24.95 per month). Start with the basic package, see how much time you're spending online, and adjust if necessary.

An "off-line reader" (OLR) will minimize your time online and keep the meter running slowly. OLRs do this by automating your data requests and delivery. Before going online, you tell your PC what information you want it to send and retrieve. Then, it does what you tell it to, while you do something else. You can download messages and library catalogs without hovering over your PC. Your time isn't wasted waiting for connections to be made, screens to be "built" or traffic to clear. Also, you don't fall prey to "browser drift." Your request must be specific; the software will only "visit" the places you tell it to ahead of time. OLR's have been available for years, but remain a surprisingly well-kept secret.

There are a number of OLRs available for use with CompuServe: OzWin (GO OZWIN), Tapcis (GO TAPCIS) and Virtual Access (GO ASHMOUNT), to name a few. Tapcis is a DOS-based application; OzWin is a 16-bit Windows application. Virtual Access is a 32-bit program that offers the ability to scan CIS forums and Internet newsgroups using one software package. These products are called "shareware," try before you buy software that you purchase online, not in a store or through a catalog; all cost under $100.

All OLRs require time up front to learn various commands and features, but they are enormous time savers in the long run. Climbing the learning curve is well worth it. I've used OzWin for some time and consider it the single most important piece of software on my PC.

In Part Two, we'll talk about how to use OLR tools to access and manage information found on Internet web sites and newsgroups. In Part Three, we'll look at how to use this collection of tools as marketing secret weapons.

If you'd like to more information on saving time with off-line readers, getting the most out of CompuServe or a current list of its forums, contact Kip Gregory at kip@gregory-group.com. Kip is Principal of The Gregory Group, a Washington, DC consulting firm that provides marketing and technology coaching to financial professionals.

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