



## Last **W**ords

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# Consumer eHealth: The Race is On

**T**he consumer eHealth race is on in Canada. How do I know? The car in front of me told me. Or, more accurately, I read about it on the car's license plate. Has all my TV watching finally caught up with me? Has the sudden blast of winter frozen my brain? Well, perhaps, but let me tell you the full story and you decide.

On a recent trip to Toronto I was hurrying from one meeting to the next, checking my blackberry along the way. Walking and checking my email is a challenge at the best of time for me but doing so with heavy winter gloves added a new dimension of frustration. Finally, deciding that a frozen hand was the price I had to pay to stay in touch, I took off one glove and scrolled through my inbox. An urgent request from a potential client caught my eye and I stopped to read it (nearly running into a lamppost was ample warning that I should stop walking). The client wanted my insight on a recent announcement from a Canadian company that had just launched a Personal Health Record (PHR) service.

I had not heard of the particular company that was making the announcement but I have been tracking what I have been calling "Consumer eHealth" for nearly a year. As I pondered how to respond to the email I noted that I had also received some voice mail. Given the force of the wind and the noise of the traffic, I waited until I arrived at my destination to check it. The first message that I retrieved was from an IT trade magazine asking for an interview about the same announcement that my potential client had referenced. A coincidence?

As I had a few minutes before my next meeting I called the reporter and we exchanged in a lively and interesting discussion about what I am calling Consumer eHealth. What is Consumer eHealth? Quite simply, it is the next logical step in putting the patient at the centre of care. Consumer eHealth encompasses a broad range of services that help people take a more active role in looking after their own health and well-being. The better known examples of Consumer eHealth services include Personal Health Records and Patient Portals.

As a founding executive of two Canadian Internet Service Providers, one of which was launched prior to the introduction of what we now call the Web, I have watched what I helped create, the Internet, change the way that we interact with one another and with the various institutions with which we do business. The banks have us banking in our home rather than with a teller at a bank branch.

The airlines have us booking our own flights and using our own paper and ink to print boarding passes. On a more personal note, my wife and I keep in touch during the day using email and instant messaging.

As I examine and analyze the emerging Consumer eHealth market, I have a strong sense of déjà vu. The first ISP that I helped start was at the very forefront of providing general consumer access to the Internet. Even in the early 1990's, prior to the advent of what we now call the Web, I could see that the Internet was going to have a profound impact on the way that we communicated and conducted business. I get the same feeling when I look at Consumer eHealth and its potential. Like the Internet that enables it, Consumer eHealth will dramatically change the way that we think about our health and the manner in which we look after it.

After finishing the telephone interview, I hurried to the elevator and on to my next meeting. The agenda for the meeting had nothing to do with Consumer eHealth but, given the two recent queries regarding the new Canadian PHR service, I decided to ask my contact his views on Consumer eHealth. Well, that question unleashed a passionate and very well thought out presentation on his organization's plans for a Consumer eHealth offering, plans that I had no idea were so far advanced prior to the meeting. Another coincidence?

When the meeting ended, I looked at my watch and realized that we had gone 30 minutes over the allotted time and that I was in danger of missing my flight home to Ottawa. I raced the six blocks back to the rental car which was parked at my hotel, jumped in the car and headed down Jarvis Street towards the Gardiner Expressway. As I pulled away from a traffic light, a BMW Z4 pulled in front of me. I could not believe my eyes when I saw the license plate. It was a vanity plate and the letters spelled out the name of the company that had made the PHR service announcement! Yet one more coincidence? I was beginning to think not.

Three coincidences in one day – surely it was a sign that January 2007 marks the date on which the Consumer eHealth race started in Canada. At least, that is the way that I choose to interpret these coincidences.

What impact do you think that Consumer eHealth will have on how individuals look after their own health? Please email me at [mmartineau@branhamgroup.com](mailto:mmartineau@branhamgroup.com) and share your thoughts. ●