As Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed, “The only thing that is constant is change.” This is particularly true for the technologic aspects of medical communication, where innovations have taken us from mainframes to desktops to laptops to tablets. When I started my career, I had to drive to the medical library with enough quarters in my pocket to copy the research articles I needed. Enter the internet and the emergence of Lonesome Doc, Grateful Med, and Medline…we had to learn new technology and practices, but work became so much easier!

Social media is yet another advancement to enter medical communicators’ work environment to which we must adapt. And while some people considered social media to be a flash in the pan, we’ve seen how quickly it has become a business necessity to maintain relevancy and remain competitive.

Some people and organizations have embraced social media more than others, with varying levels of sophistication. In his report for Digital Tourism Think Tank, William Bakker, Chief Strategist from Think! Social Media, identifies 5 levels of social media sophistication as they relate to destination marketing organizations.1 With minor adaptations, I have delineated 4 levels that apply to medical communicators (Figure 1).

Our level of social media sophistication directly relates to our comfort with social media. Each of us has a social media comfort zone—that behavioral space where activities and behaviors feel familiar, thus minimizing levels of stress and anxiety. Below, Eleanor Mayfield, AMWA’s 2017 President’s Award Winner, describes her approach to dealing with the new technology and practices involved in social media.

Full disclosure: I came of age in the pre-internet era. As a college student, I typed my assignments on a manual typewriter. My first computer had 64 kilobytes of memory (no, that’s not a misprint). I began my freelance medical writing business in the “Dark Ages” before email—let alone social media—existed.

In other words, I am a “digital immigrant”—someone who grew up before the advent of digital technology. The rap on digital immigrants is that we are forever destined to lack the comfort level with technology of “digital natives”—people born or brought up in the digital age, who have no memory of life before the existence of computers, smart phones, or the internet.

I plead guilty. Even though I now find it difficult to imagine how I ever found my way anywhere before I had navigation on my phone to direct me, I’m aware

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**Figure 1.** Four levels of social media engagement

**Level 1**

**Ignoring Social Media**
- Fear of, lack of knowledge about, or disinterest in social media
- “Social media is a waste of time.”

**Level 2**

**Experimenting with Social Media**
- Random use of social media to see what it’s all about
- “Maybe I’ll give this a try.”

**Level 3**

**Using Social Media to Build a Network**
- Regular efforts to engage with colleagues and customers as a way to network, but without a strategic approach
- “I want to connect with as many people as I can.”

**Level 4**

**Following a Social Media Strategy**
- Strategies are tied to marketing goals and objectives
- “I’m going to spend an hour each day and focus my social media marketing efforts on this particular niche.”

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By Eleanor Mayfield, ELS¹ with commentary by Cynthia L. Kryder, MS²

¹Freelance Medical Communicator, Pittsburgh, PA; ²Social Media Section Editor and Freelance Medical Communicator, Phoenixville, PA
that my attitude toward digital technology will likely always be shaped to some extent by the fact that my formative years occurred before such technology existed.

So when Cyndy Kryder, who edits this section of the AMWA Journal, invited me to submit a piece about how social media has changed how I operate my business, I initially demurred. Although I have a business-related social media presence, I am far from being a social media maven. I did not think I was the right person to write about this topic because I had difficulty at first thinking of ways that social media has significantly changed my business.

When I considered the topic more deeply, however, I realized that social media has indeed affected my business in subtle but important ways. I will focus my comments on LinkedIn, because it is the dominant social media site for professionals as well as the site that I make the most regular and consistent use of for business purposes.

LinkedIn has made it much easier for me to maintain connections with people despite job changes and other professional moves. Before, if a business contact moved to another job, it was easy to lose track of that person. Now, when they update their LinkedIn profile, as a connection I’m notified of the move and prompted to send a note of congratulations—a perfect opportunity to get in touch and offer them all the best in their new position. LinkedIn notifications of job anniversaries offer a similar opportunity.

Reconnecting with my LinkedIn contacts is a strategy I’ve used in recent years whenever I’ve needed to drum up new business. This has been quite successful for me; a few years ago, reconnecting with someone I had worked with several years earlier led to that person recommending me to replace her in a contract position she was about to leave. I landed the job, and it became a major source of income for me over the next couple of years.

Last year, when that client made a business decision to terminate the project I’d been working on, I reached out to my LinkedIn network again. This led to my reconnecting with another former client, for whom I’m now working on a couple of ongoing projects.

Earlier this year I reached out to another LinkedIn contact after receiving a notification that she had left a job she had been doing for several years to return to freelancing. It turns out she’s planning to write a book on a topic with which I had gained experience in the contract position that terminated last year. We’ve agreed

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**TIPS FOR DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS**

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<th>Do</th>
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<td>Be open to approaching an issue or topic in a non-linear fashion—e.g., instead of proceeding one step at a time from beginning to end, start at a random point and work both forward and backward from that point.</td>
<td>Assume that the way you have always approached learning and communicating is the “best” or “only” way.</td>
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<td>Be willing to admit what you don’t know about digital technology and commit to improving your “digital literacy.”</td>
<td>Assume that all members of the digital-native generation have had the same level of exposure to technology while growing up. Young people from families of limited means may not have had computers and video games at home or their own cell phone.</td>
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**TIPS FOR DIGITAL NATIVES**

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<td>Appreciate the life experience that digital immigrants have accumulated. They were your age once and had many of the same experiences that you and your friends are dealing with, albeit without the same technology. Be willing to seek advice or guidance.</td>
<td>Dismiss digital immigrants as “old foggies” whose thinking is outdated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be patient with digital immigrants when sharing technological know-how. Support and encourage their use of technology.</td>
<td>Expect digital immigrants to have the same comfort level with certain types of technology (e.g., digital payment apps) that you and your friends do.</td>
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**TIPS FOR BOTH DIGITAL NATIVES AND DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS**

- Consider the communication preference of the person you want to communicate with and defer to their likely preference. Once the connection is made, ask how the person would prefer to communicate going forward and then defer to that method.

<table>
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<th>Digital immigrant ➢ Digital native</th>
<th>Digital native ➢ Digital immigrant</th>
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<tr>
<td>Text, instant message</td>
<td>Email, phone, face-to-face meeting</td>
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- Learn from each other.

**Sources:**


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