

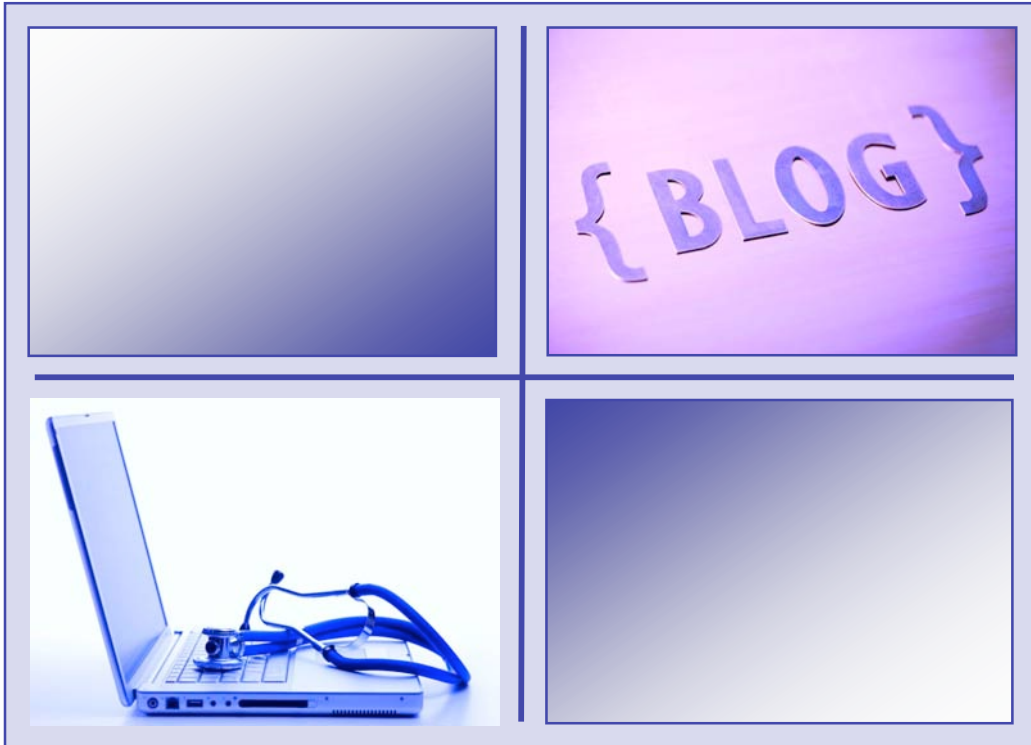


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Envision Solutions Insight Report: The Evolving Health Blogosphere

September 2008



The second in a series of studies examining the ways in which people are using various interactive technologies for health.

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About Envision Solutions, LLC

Envision Solutions, LLC is a full-service healthcare marketing communications consulting firm. The company provides innovative products and services to not-for-profit and for-profit organizations. Its core competencies are in the areas of analysis, strategic and tactical recommendation development, training and content development.

Please visit www.envisionsolutionsnow.com for more information about the firm, or call 212-501-6101.

I. Introduction

Questions:

How many people in the US are blogging about health? How did health blogging evolve globally between 2006 and 2007?

In 2006, Envision Solutions and Trusted.MD (formerly The Medical Blog Network) released the results of the first-ever global survey of health and medical bloggers.[1] This study revealed that many respondents were writing anonymously about their personal experiences and other topics. [1]

Although the 2006 study provided important information about a population of active health bloggers, one question remained: How many people are blogging about health? In 2006, the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 120,000 bloggers in the United States wrote about this topic regularly. However, the health blogosphere has significantly expanded over the past two years. For example, a number of noted publications, including the [Wall Street Journal](#), the [New York Times](#), and [Health Affairs](#) have launched blogs focusing on health and wellness. Given this, we need new information that will help us better understand the current state of health blogging in the United States and around the world.

This report outlines the results of two studies that provide the most in-depth portrait of the health blogosphere to date. We present new data indicating that health blogging has become increasingly popular in the US. In addition, a new global online survey reveals the diversity and changing attitudes and behaviors of an active global health blogging population.

Read on to learn more about the evolving healthcare blogosphere.

II. How Widespread Is Health Blogging In The US?

Insight:

Almost half of all US bloggers wrote about health over a six-month period.

Our research reveals that health is a popular subject in the US blogosphere. Ten percent of American adults say they blogged about this topic at least once between February and August 2008 (see **Figure 2.1**).¹ Overall, 47% of US bloggers wrote about health during this period.

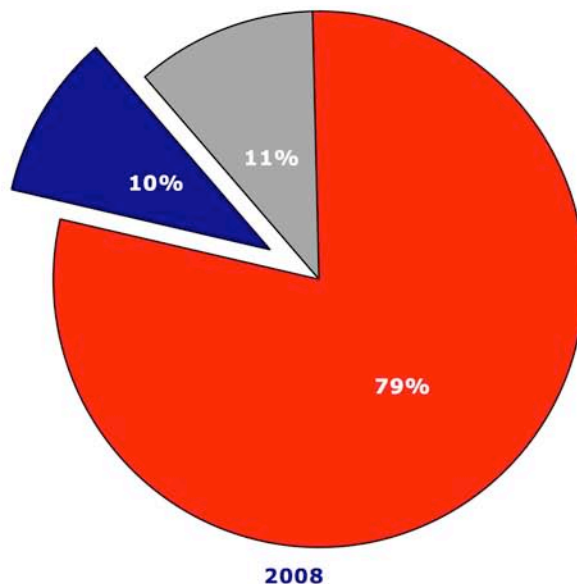
Figure 2.1: Nearly Half Of Recent US Bloggers Wrote About Health

If you have written a blog post either for your own Weblog or another blog during the past six months, was at least one about a health-related topic?
For the purpose of this survey, please think about a "health-related blog post" as anything referring to health news, health politics, fitness, your own personal health, a medicine, health policy or another topic.*
(n = 2,000 US Adults, 18+)

*Previous six months = February 2008 to August 2008

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC

- ◆ Yes, I have written at least one blog post about a health-related topic
- ◆ Yes, I have written at least one blog post, but none have been about health
- ◆ No, I have not written a blog post during the past six months



¹ This figure translates to 22.6 million US adults.

Insight:

The total US adult health blogging population stands at 13.6 million as of August 2008.

We also investigated how many people wrote on blogs focusing primarily on health. Sixty percent of Americans blogging about health did so on blogs devoted to this subject. We estimate that 13.6 million US adults blogged on health-focused Weblogs between February and August 2008 (see **Figure 2.2**). We define this group as the total US adult health blogging population.

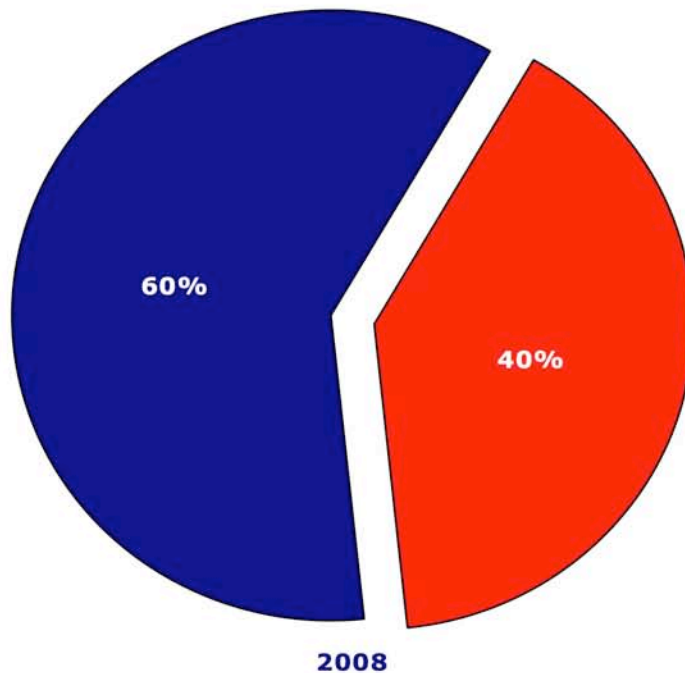
Figure 2.2: Percentage Of Recent US Bloggers Writing About Health On Blogs Devoted To This Topic

If you have written a health-related blog post either for your own blog or another Weblog within the past six months, is health the main topic of the blog you were writing for (i.e. at least half of blog posts are about a health topic)?
(n = 198 US Adults, 18+)

*Previous six months = February 2008 to August 2008

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC

- ◆ Yes, health is the main topic of either my blog or the blog I wrote for
- ◆ No, health is not the main topic of either my blog or the blog I wrote for



Insight:

US health bloggers are predominantly female, diverse and young.

Overall, the US health blogging population is very diverse. The majority of health bloggers are female (see **Figure 2.3**). In addition, 38% are either African American or Hispanic (see **Figure 2.4**). Finally, most are between the ages of 25 and 44 (see **Figure 2.5**).

Figure 2.3: US Adult Health Bloggers By Gender

Yes, health is the main topic of either my blog or the blog I wrote for.
(n = 119 US Adults, 18+)

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC

Female Male

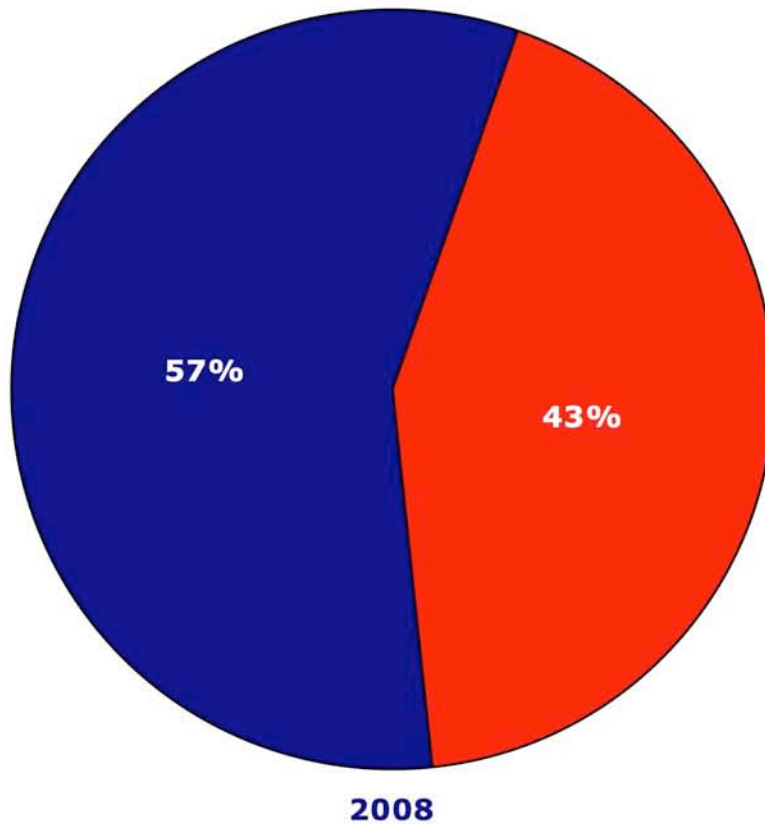


Figure 2.4: Race Of US Adult Health Blogging Population

**Yes, health is the main topic of either my blog or the blog I wrote for.
(n = 119 US Adults, 18+)**

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC

-  White
-  Black
-  Hispanic

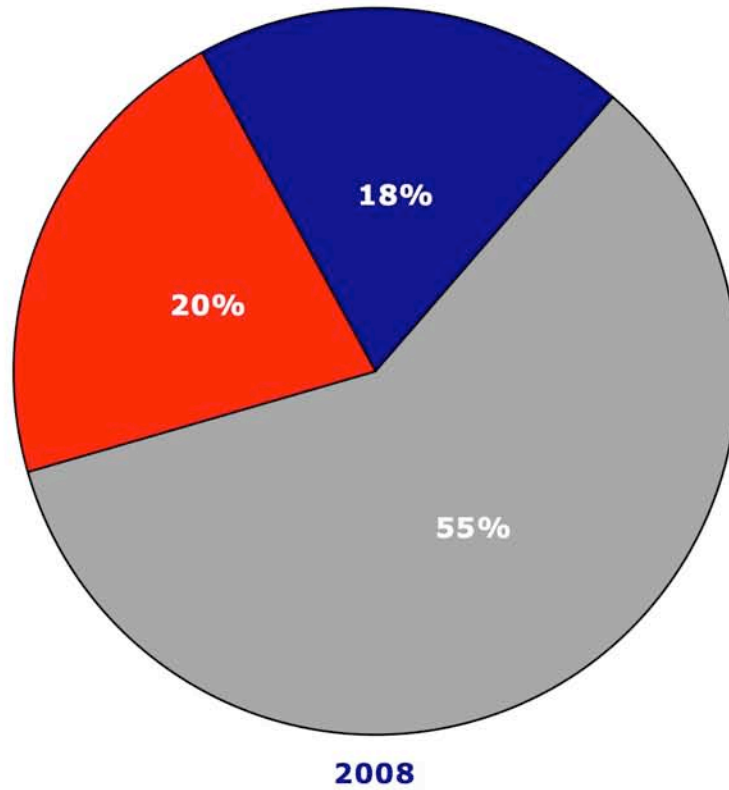
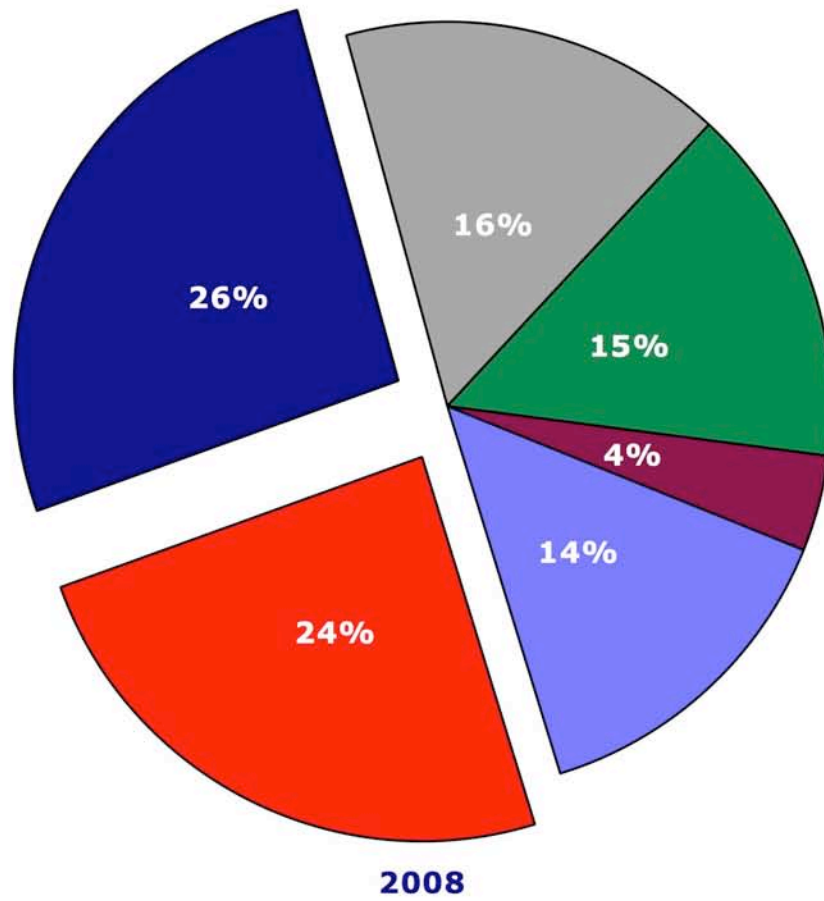


Figure 2.5: Age Of US Adult Health Blogging Population

Yes, health is the main topic of either my blog or the blog I wrote for.
(n = 119 US Adults, 18+)

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC

18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65+



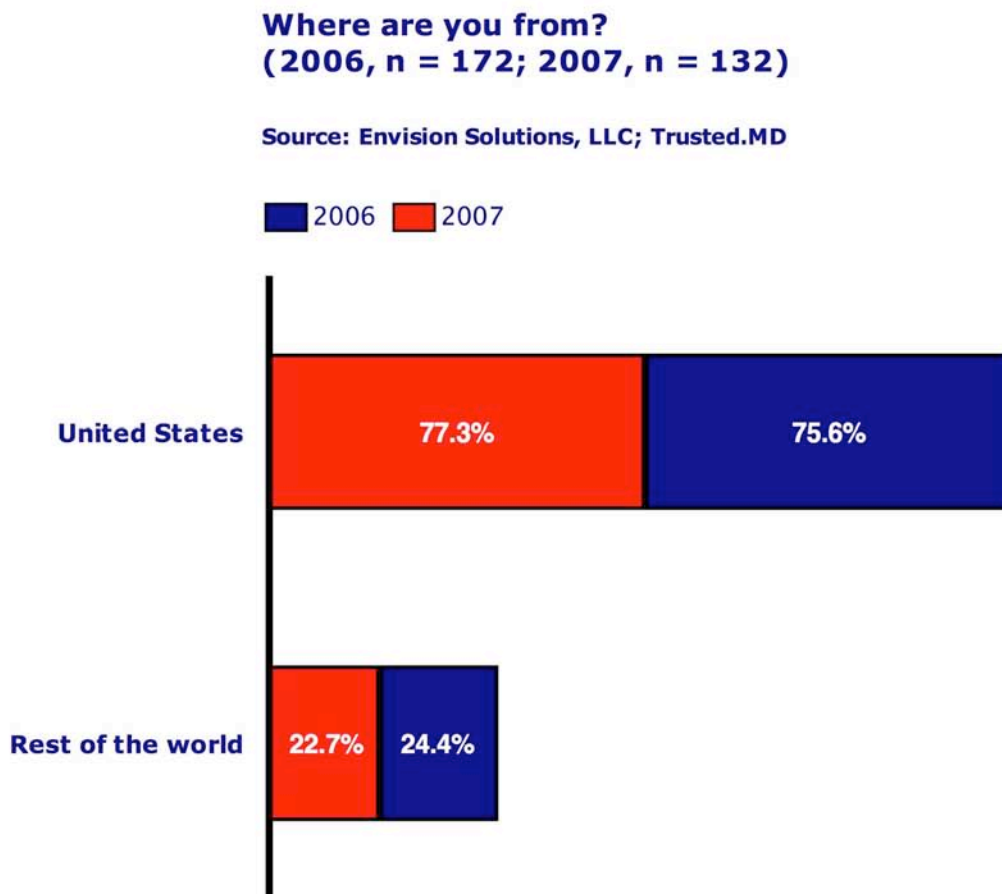
III. How Health Blogging Is Evolving Globally

In 2007, Envision Solutions and Trusted.MD fielded the second edition of a global online survey designed to gather additional information about the changing behaviors and beliefs of a diverse array of active health bloggers. The key results of this study are outlined below.

Survey Population Remains Largely Consistent Between 2006 & 2007

Although the total number of respondents to the survey dropped between 2006 and 2007 (from 214 to 138), the study population remained largely consistent.

Figure 3.1: Most Respondents From United States

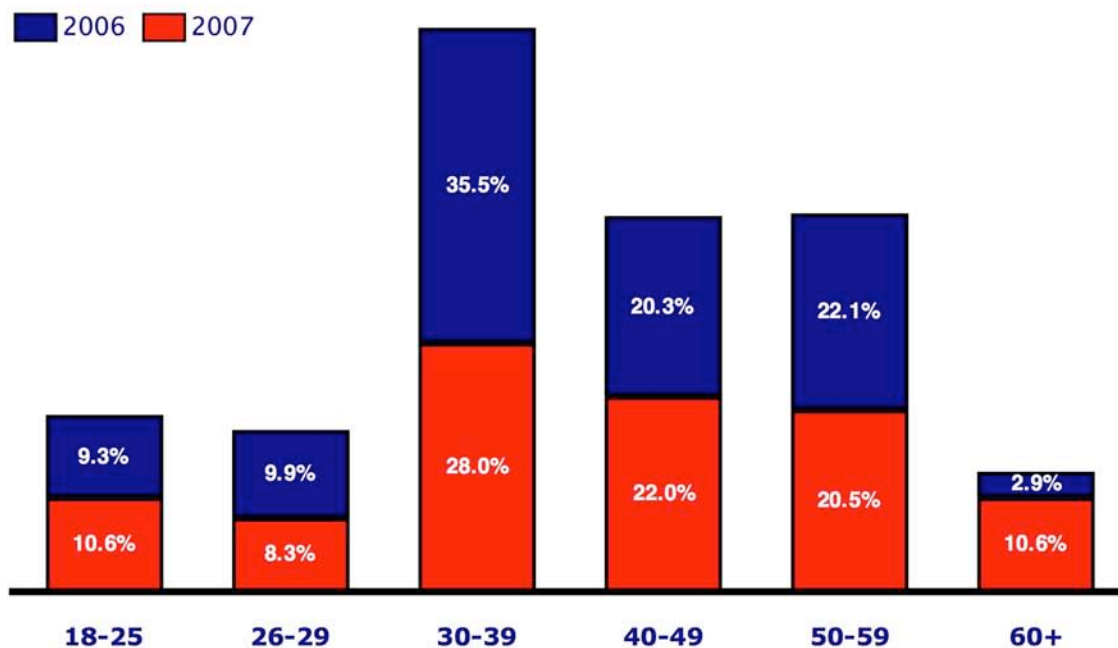


Most significantly, as was the case in 2006, more than 75% of respondents were from the United States (see **Figure 3.1**). In addition, the majority were between 30 and 59 years old (see **Figure 3.2**).

Figure 3.2: Majority Of Respondents Between 30 & 59

**What is your age?
(2006, n = 172; 2007, n = 132)**

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD



In 2007, the study population was slightly more diverse. The percentage of whites responding to the poll dropped by 9% between 2006 and 2007 (see **Table 3.1**). In contrast, a higher percentage of Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native health bloggers took the second edition of the survey.

Overall, a lower percentage of female and physician bloggers participated in the poll in 2007 (see **Figures 3.3 and 3.4**). In addition, the number of health consultants taking the survey increased from 12% to 15% between 2006 and 2007 (see **Figure 3.4**).

Table 3.1: Survey Population More Diverse In 2007

What is your racial or ethnic background? (2006, n = 170; 2007, n = 131)		
Race/Ethnicity	% (2007)	% (2006)
White	78.6%	87.6%
Black	1.5%	1.2%
Hispanic	0.8%	0%
Asian	8.4%	6.5%
Arab	0%	1.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.5%	0%
Other	1.5%	1.8
I prefer not to say	7.6%	1.8%

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

Figure 3.3: Fewer Females Responded To Survey In 2007

What is your gender?
(2006, n = 172; 2007, n = 132)

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

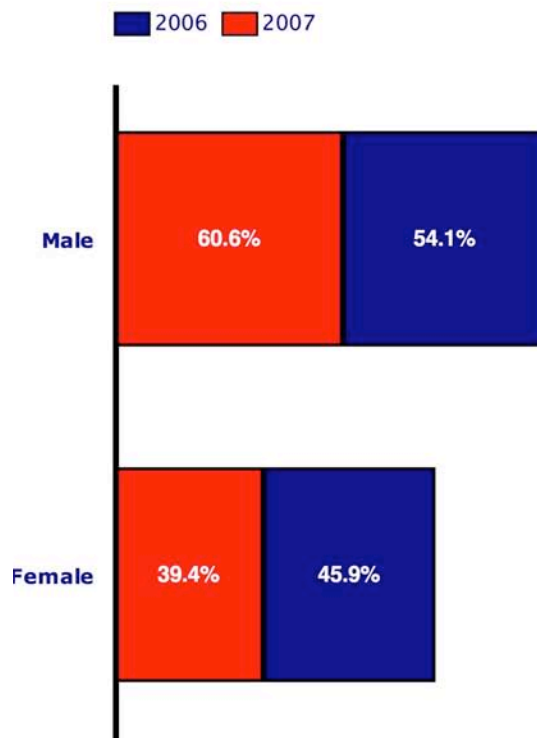
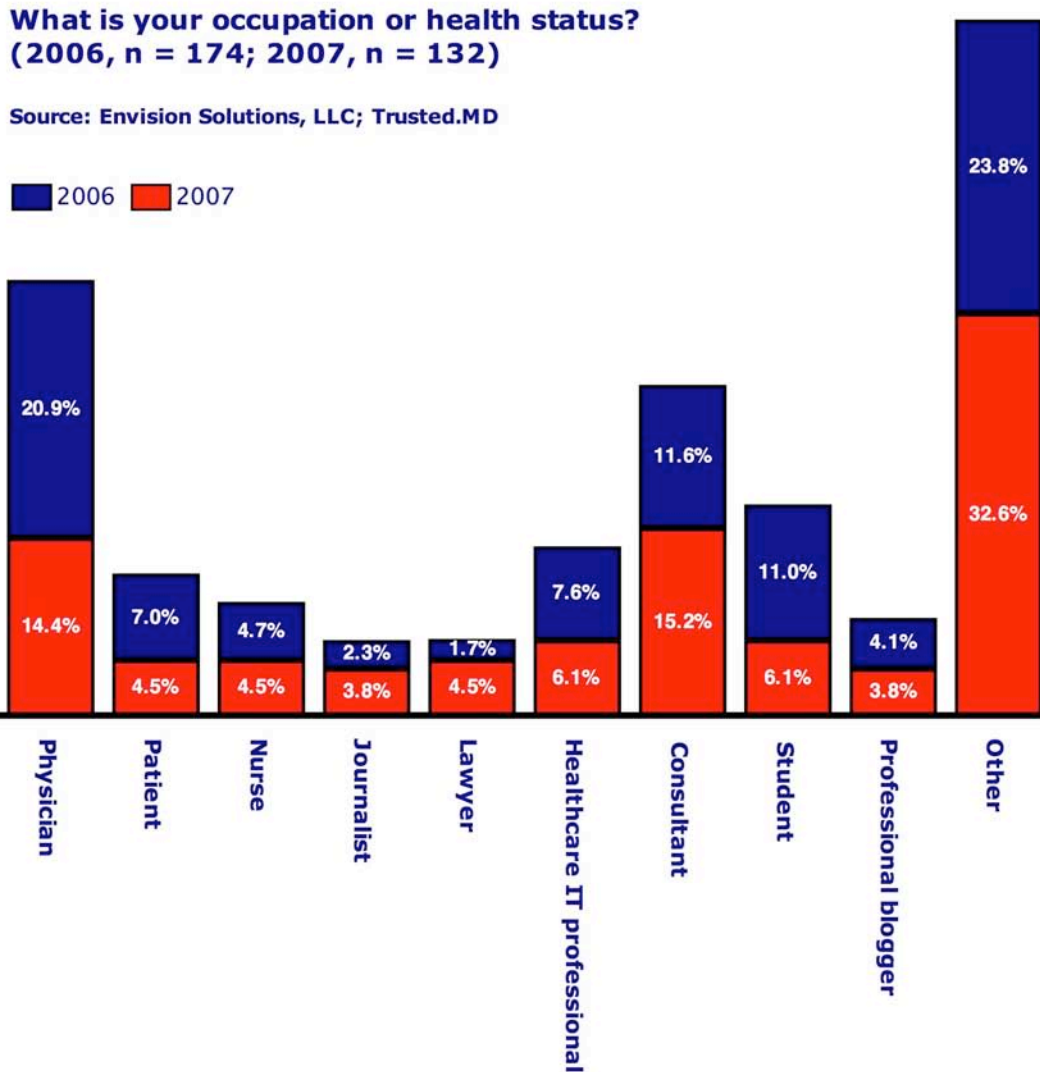


Figure 3.4: Physicians No Longer Largest Percentage Of Survey Respondents



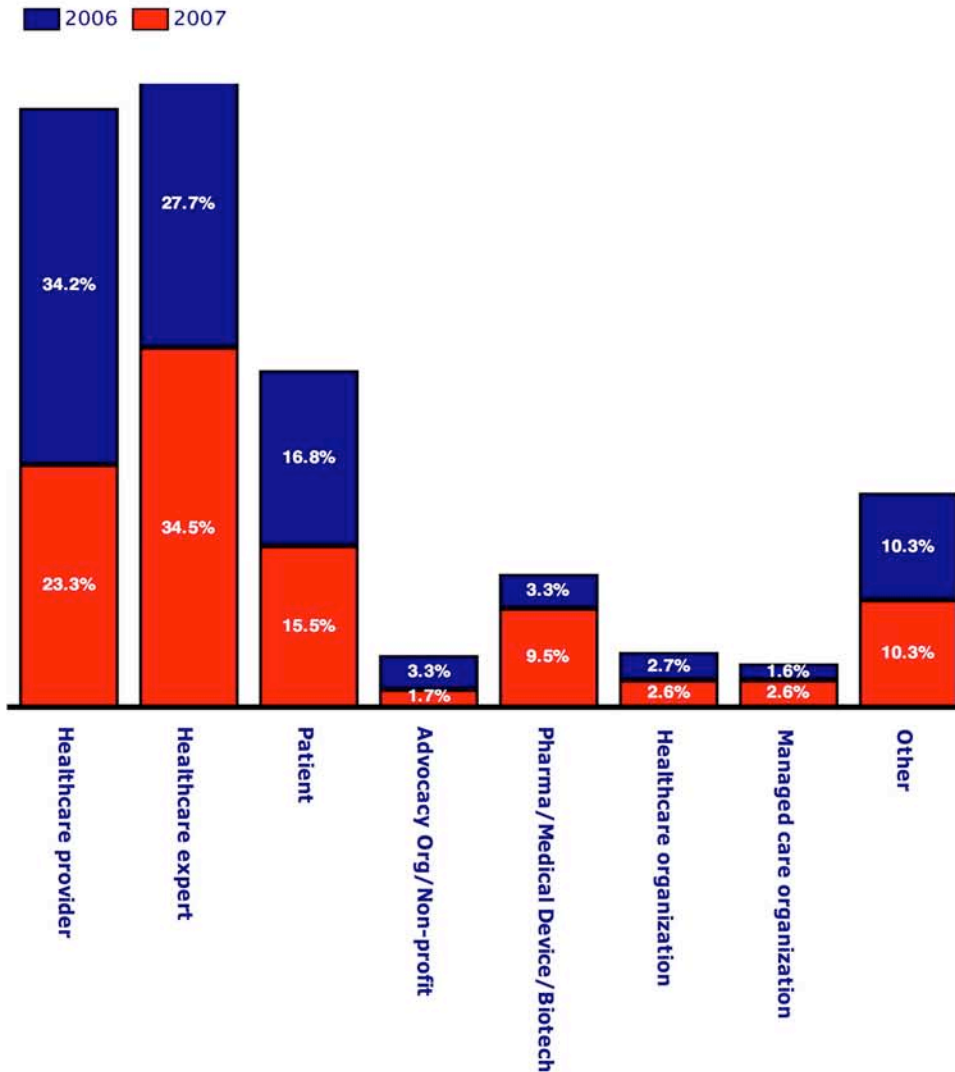
Partly because of the large numbers of non-medical professionals responding to the poll, the percentage of bloggers saying they write healthcare expert-related blogs significantly increased in 2007 (see **Figure 3.5**).

Figure 3.5: Healthcare Expert-Related Blogs Take Top Spot In 2007

What is the primary category of your blog?*
 (2006, n = 185; 2007, n = 116)

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*Data for respondents' first blog is shown, as most write one Weblog.



Blogging Habits & Motivations

Overall, most respondents to the 2007 survey were very active health bloggers. Eighty-five percent devoted more than half their blog posts to health-related topics (see **Figure 3.6**). In addition, 70% wrote one blog (see **Figure 3.7**).

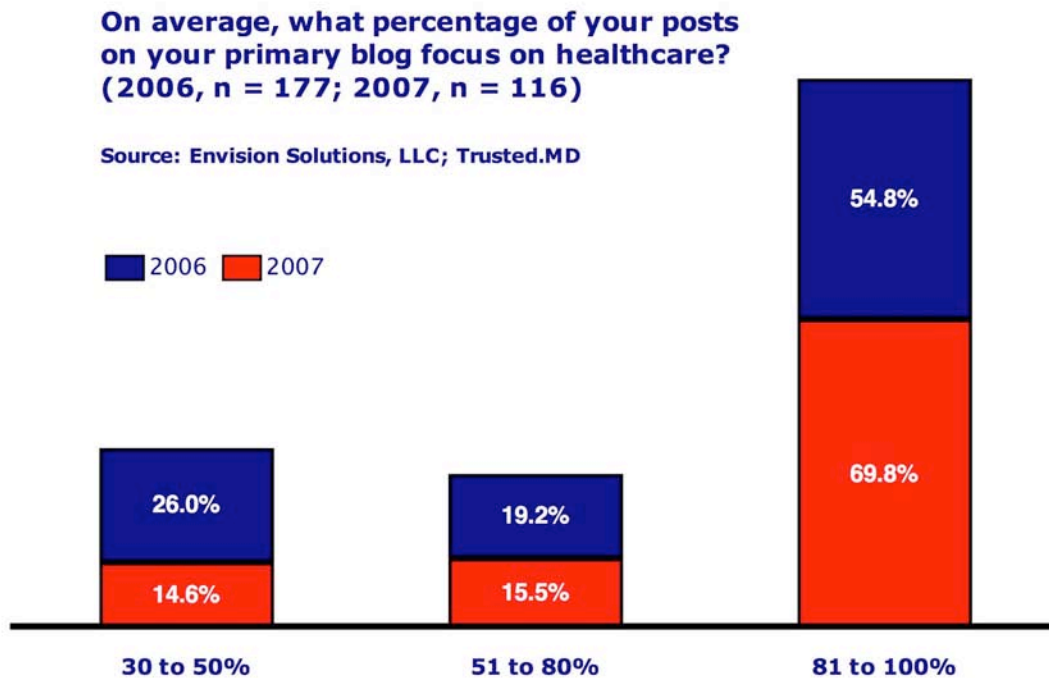
Interestingly, in 2007, respondents were more likely to report that they blogged for patients and health executives (see **Figure 3.8**). In contrast with 2006, fewer bloggers listed health providers as their most important audience.

Insight:

Health blogs are coming under increased scrutiny. This may be reducing some bloggers' willingness to write about personal topics.

We also found that more respondents in 2007 said they blogged to educate others rather than to share their opinions (see **Figure 3.9**). Given this, it is unsurprising that fewer bloggers reported writing about their personal experiences that year (see **Figure 3.10**).

Figure 3.6: More Respondents Focusing Heavily On Health



We speculate that the growing popularity and diversification of health blogs may be one reason some bloggers were less willing to write about their personal experiences in 2007. For example, unlike some medical professionals, consultants may wish to focus on health policy or news to showcase their expertise.

These individuals may not believe revealing personal information about themselves makes good business sense. In addition, partly because health blogs are highly indexed by major search engines, there are greater odds that the blogs will be scrutinized by patients, critics, and others.

Figure 3.7: Most Bloggers Writing One Health-Related Blog

How many healthcare blogs do you personally write?*
(2006, n = 195; 2007, n = 124)

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*Data for those writing between three and eight blogs not shown.

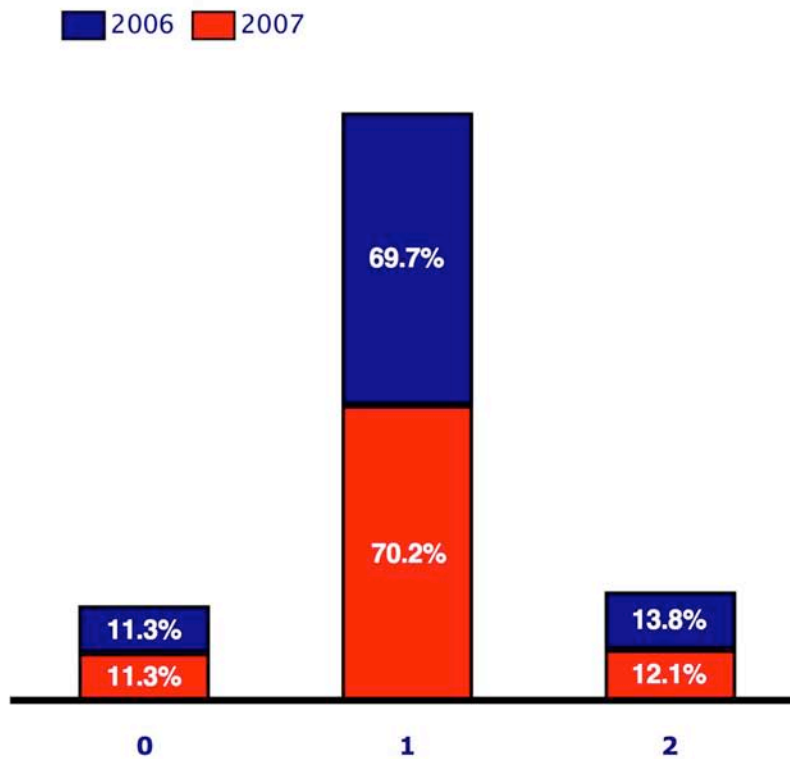


Figure 3.8: More Bloggers Writing For Patients & Health Executives

What is the most important audience you write for on your primary healthcare blog?*
(2006, n = 169; 2007, n = 113)

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*I don't know responses not included in total.

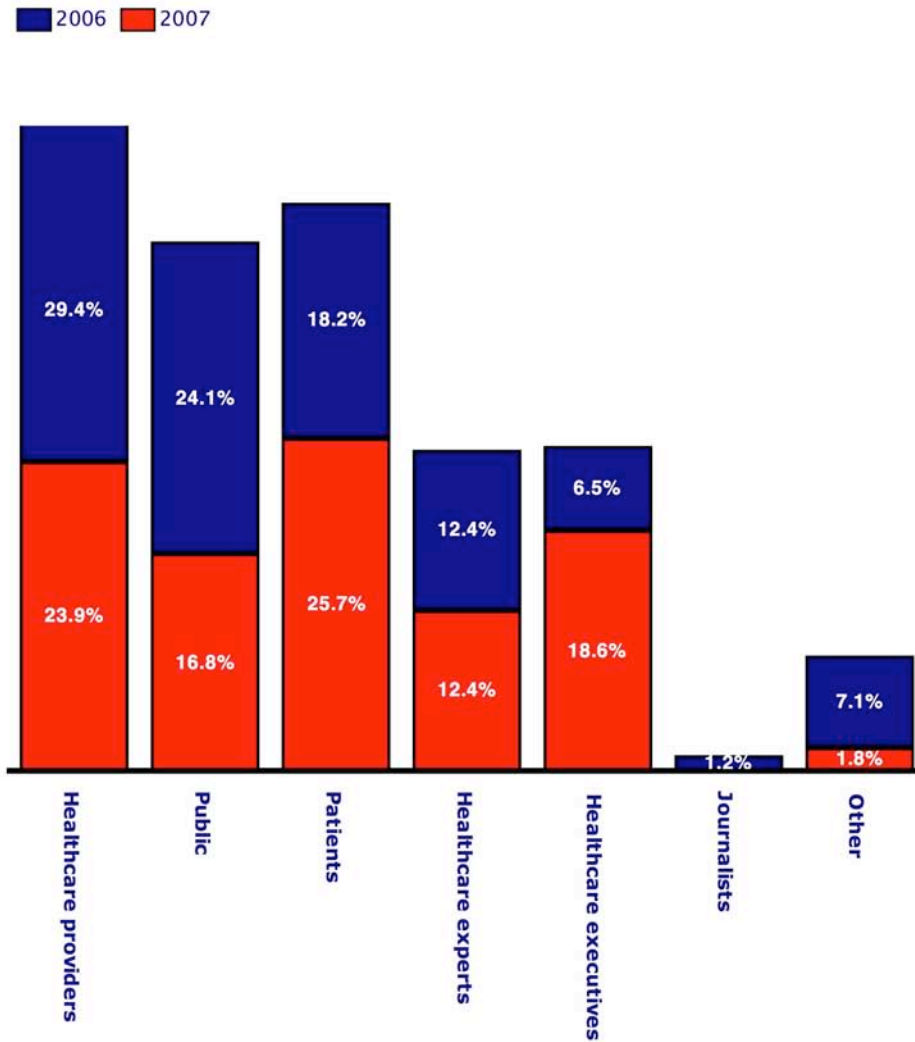


Figure 3.9: Education, Marketing More Important To Respondents In 2007

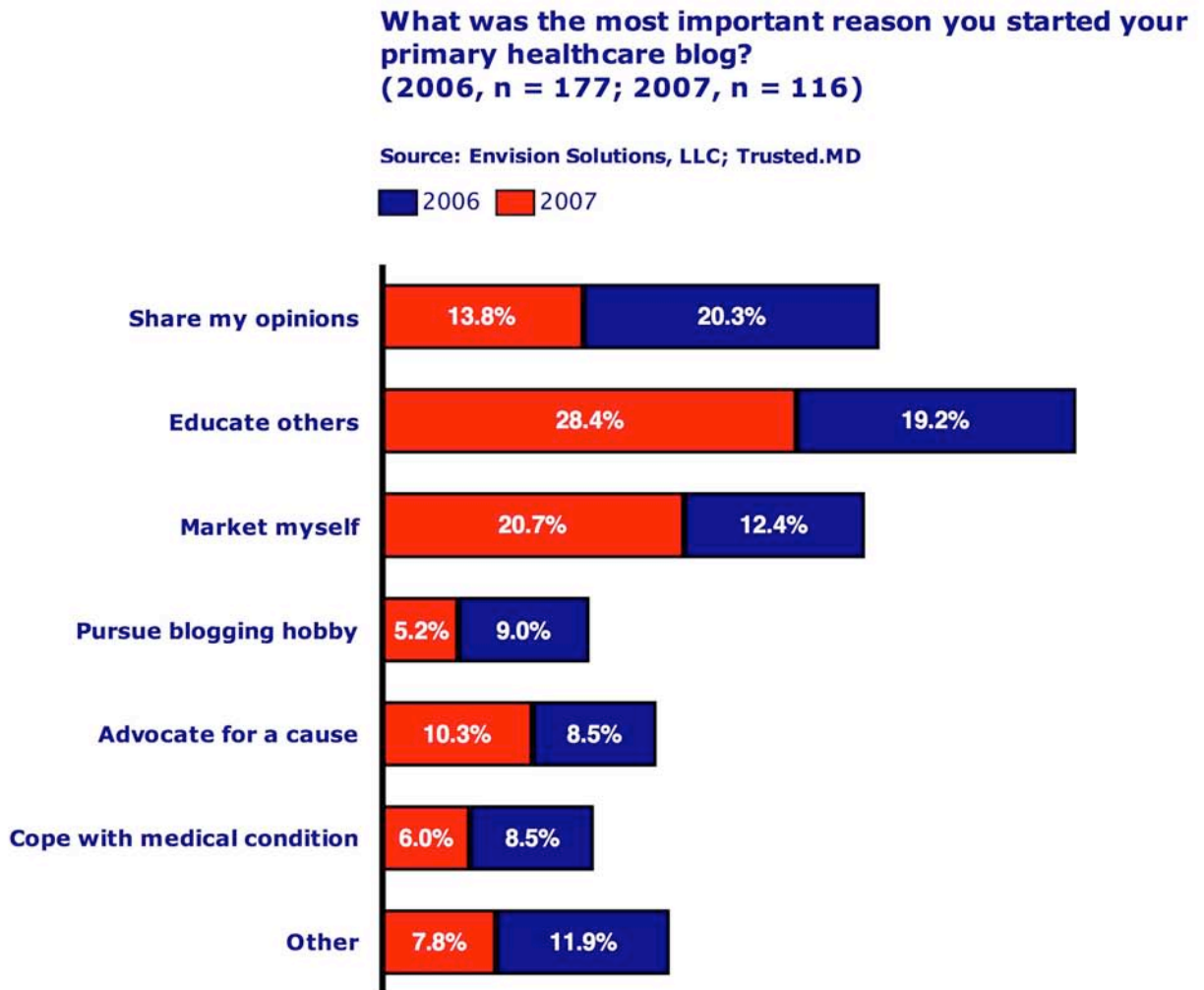
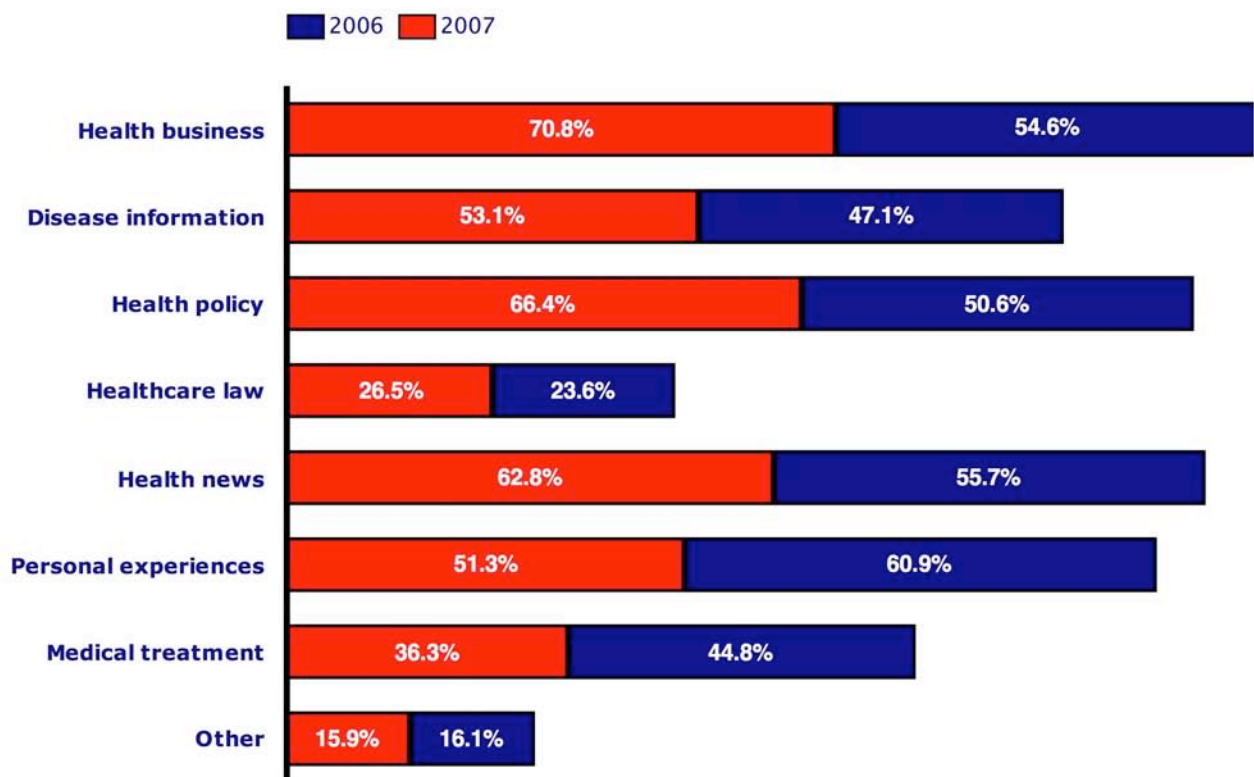


Figure 3.10: Fewer Bloggers Writing About Personal Experiences

What healthcare-related topics do you cover on your blog?*
(2006, n = 174; 2007, n = 113)

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*Data for respondents' first blog is shown, as most write one Weblog.



Anonymity In The Healthcare Blogosphere

Insight:

Negative news coverage and the realization that privacy is not guaranteed may be causing some physicians to shun anonymous blogging.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of this survey was that only 20% of respondents said that they hid their identity in 2007. In contrast, nearly 40% engaged in anonymous blogging in 2006 (see **Figure 3.11**). After further analysis, we found this sharp drop-off was partly fueled by changes in the blogging habits of medical professionals.

As illustrated in **Figure 3.13**, physicians were much less likely to hide their identity in 2007. In addition, fewer sites characterized as “health provider blogs” were written anonymously that year (see **Figure 3.12**).

Figure 3.11: Percentage of Anonymous Bloggers Drops Sharply

**Do you blog about healthcare anonymously?
(2006, n = 199; 2007, n = 127)**

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

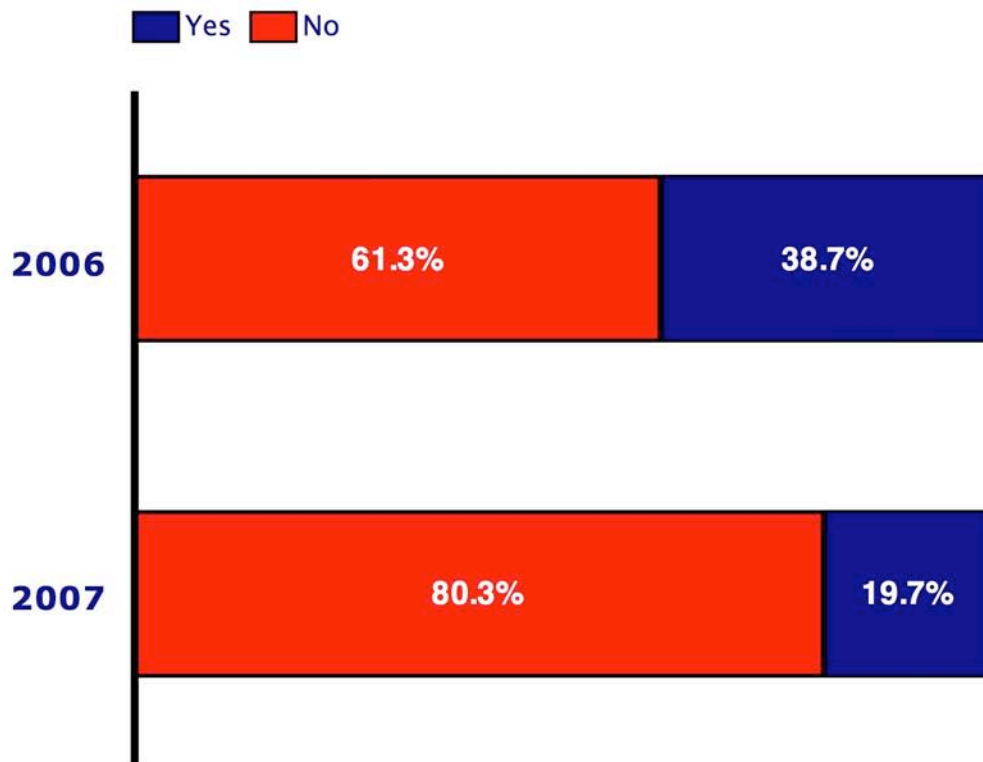


Figure 3.12: Health Provider Blogs Less Likely To Be Anonymous

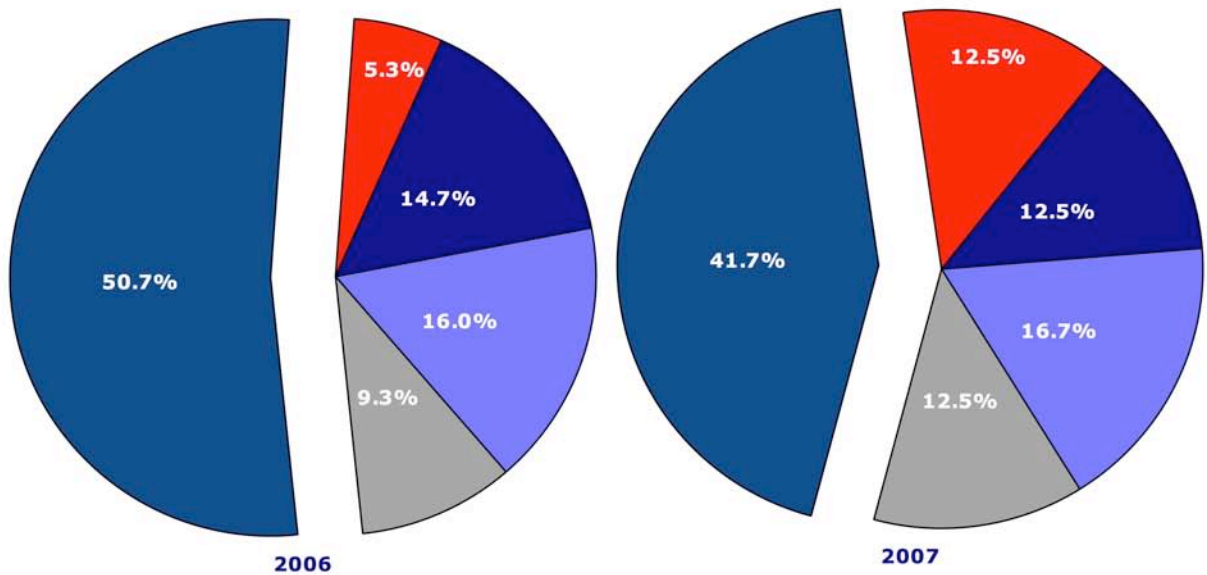
Yes, I blog about healthcare anonymously.*
 (2006, n = 75; 2007, n = 24)+

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*Data organized by **blog_category**; statistics for blog 1 highlighted because most write one Weblog.

+Data for advocacy/non-profit, managed care, healthcare organization blogs not shown.

- ◆ Healthcare provider
- ◆ Pharma/Medical Device/Biotech
- ◆ Healthcare expert
- ◆ Patient
- ◆ Other



Negative media coverage may have influenced providers' blogging habits. For example, a few months before the 2007 survey was fielded, the *Detroit Free Press* published a widely-cited article questioning the wisdom of anonymous blogging by medical professionals.[2] In May 2007 it was revealed that a physician using the pseudonym "Flea" lost a malpractice case because he wrote about it on his blog.[3] Finally, in 2006, Australian blogger "Barbados Butterfly" was forced to shutter her blog after her hospital employer learned she was writing anonymously online about her experiences as a surgeon.[4]

Figure 3.13: Fewer Physician Respondents Blogging Anonymously

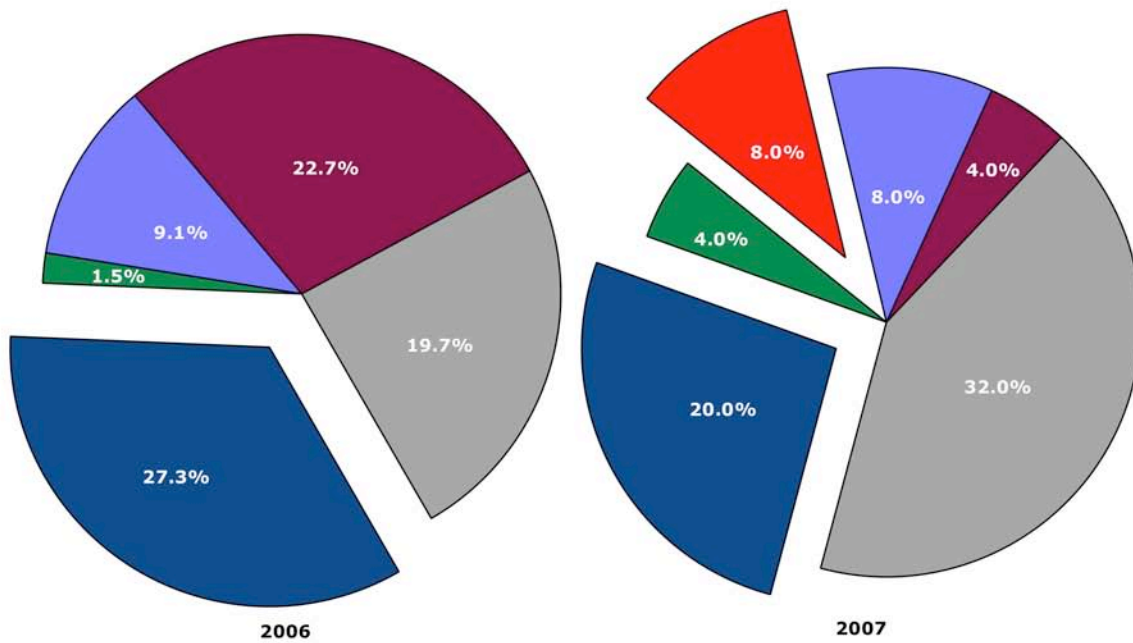
Yes, I blog about healthcare anonymously.*
(2006, n = 66; 2007, n = 25)+

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*Data organized by occupation/status of blogger.

+Data for nurse practitioners, physician assistants, caregivers, health IT professionals, professional bloggers not shown.

Physician Consultant
Nurse Patient
Student Other



IV. Media, Marketers & Health Bloggers

Insight:

Increasingly, the media rely on blogs for information and expert commentary.

In addition, marketers are targeting bloggers for advertising and public relations purposes.

As health blogs have increased in popularity, the media, public relations professionals, and advertisers have begun to view them as important news sources and marketing channels. For example, popular Weblogs such as *The Health Care Blog* (www.thehealthcareblog.com) regularly feature advertisements from a host of Internet start-ups, hospitals, and other organizations. Also, public relations professionals often approach prominent patient bloggers with story ideas for future blog posts. In addition, journalists from a range of media outlets read health blogs regularly, and sometimes cite bloggers in news reports, or interview them for stories.

Our research reveals that health blogs have become an increasingly important resource for reporters. Between 2006 and 2007, the number of bloggers reporting media contact increased by 45% (see **Figure 4.1**).

We also found that public relations (PR) professionals are targeting bloggers more often. In 2007, nearly half of respondents said they had been contacted by a PR representative versus approximately one-third of respondents in 2006 (see **Figure 4.2**).²

In addition, more respondents report that they have run advertisements on their blogs. Thirty-five percent published commercials in 2007 versus 27% in 2006 (see **Figure 4.3**).

² We did not ask respondents to tell us if they had written about a topic suggested by a public relations professional, in 2007. In 2006, however, 52% developed at least one blog post about a topic a PR executive asked them to cover.

Figure 4.1: Health Bloggers Reporting Media Contact Increases By 45%

**Has a member of the media ever contacted you?
(2006, n = 171; 2007, n = 113)**

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

■ 2006 ■ 2007

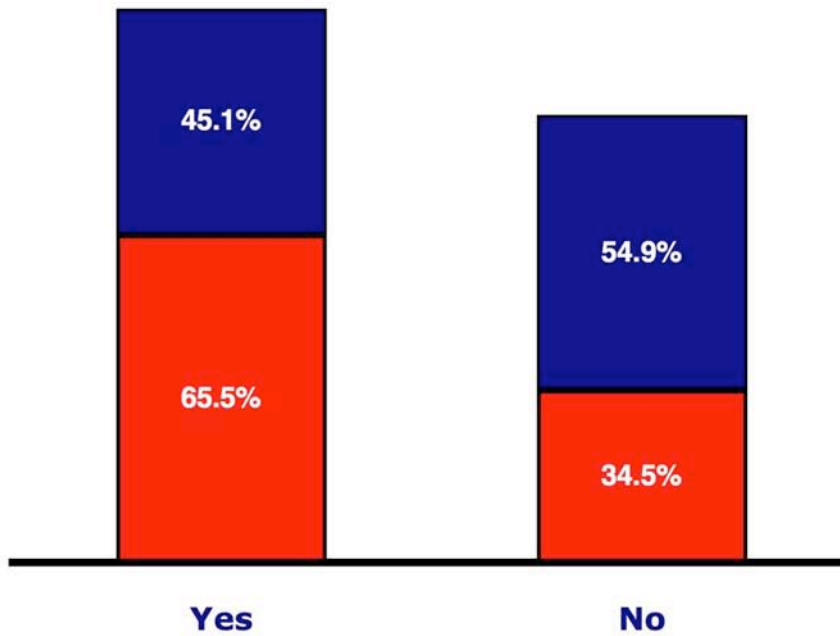


Figure 4.2: PR Professionals Reaching Out To Bloggers More Often

**Has a public relations professional ever contacted you?
(2006, n = 171; 2007, n = 113)**

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

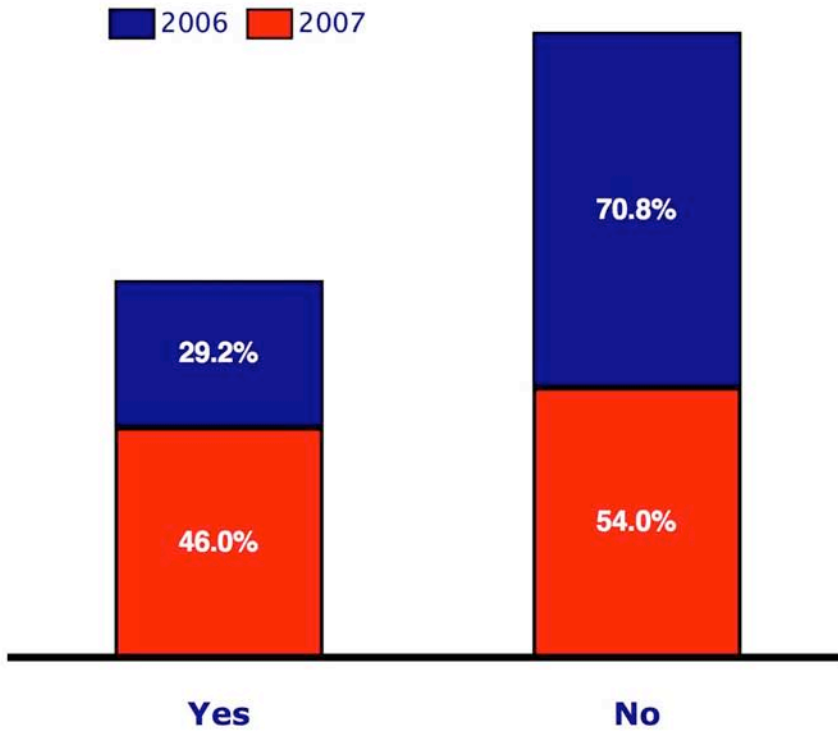
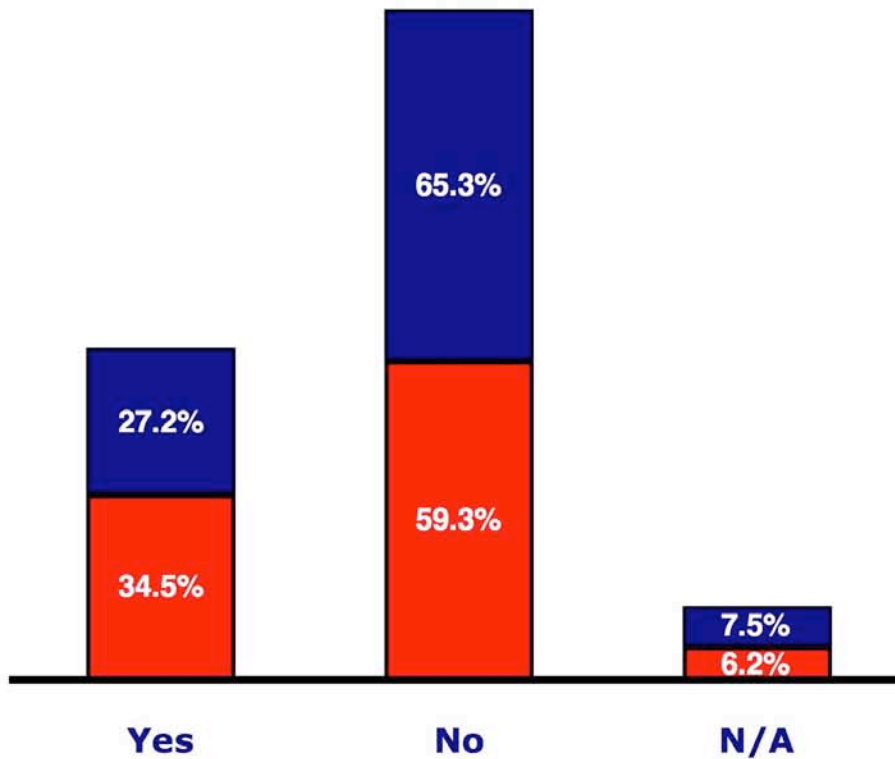


Figure 4.3: Bloggers More Likely To Run Advertising

**Have you ever run advertising on your blog?
(2006, n = 173; 2007, n = 113)**

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

■ 2006 ■ 2007



V. Trust & Credibility In The Health Blogosphere

Insight:

Respondents continued to view health blog content critically. However, many were confident most health bloggers disclosed conflicts of interest.

Marketing activity in the health blogosphere has been a source of concern for some. In a 2006 study, for example, Dr. Tara Lagu found that 11% of the 271 medical blogs her team analyzed featured postings about medical products.[5] Lagu suggested that medical professionals “may compromise their professionalism because they fail to reveal conflicts of interest.”[5]

Despite these concerns, we found that many health bloggers were reasonably confident of the trustworthiness and credibility of their peers. Overall, respondents continued to be split over whether running advertising has a negative impact on blogger credibility (see **Figure 5.1**). Seventy-nine percent, however, either agreed or strongly agreed that a blogger’s background and biases have a greater influence on credibility than advertising does (data not shown).

We also found that the percentage of respondents who said they had high confidence in bloggers’ statements dipped between 2006 and 2007 (see **Figure 5.2**).³ However, the number of bloggers reporting that their peers consistently revealed apparent conflicts of interest increased (see **Figure 5.3**).⁴

Overall, the majority of health bloggers with extensive experience evaluating peer content were confident that most of their peers operate ethically.

³ High confidence: 81% and 100% of blogs are written by people whose statements they can take at face value. Moderate confidence: 41% to 60%. Low confidence: 0% to 40%.

⁴ High confidence was defined as a bloggers saying they believe between 81% and 100% of bloggers disclose apparent and implied conflicts of interest. Moderate confidence: 41% to 60%. Low confidence: 0% to 40%.

Figure 5.1: Respondents Still Split On Impact Of Advertising On Credibility

**Does running advertising negatively affect blogger credibility?
(2006, n = 168; 2007, n = 109)***

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*"I don't know" responses not included in total.

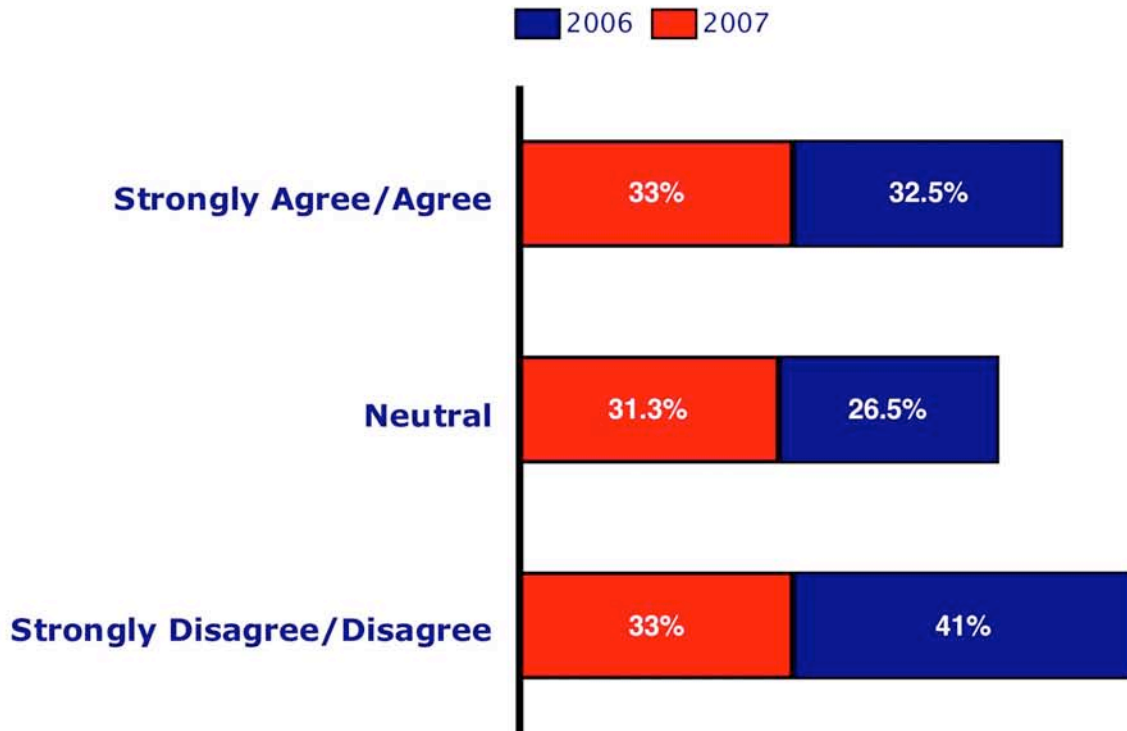


Figure 5.2: Fewer Readers Have High Confidence in Bloggers' Statements

Confidence that healthcare bloggers' statements can be taken at face value (2006, n = 157; 2007, n = 109)*

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*"I don't know" responses not included in total.

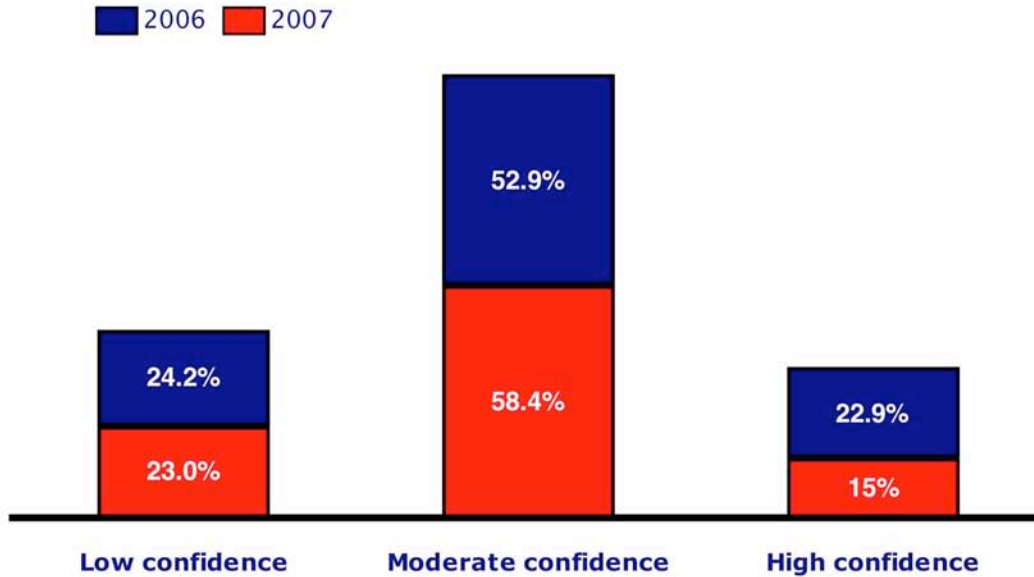
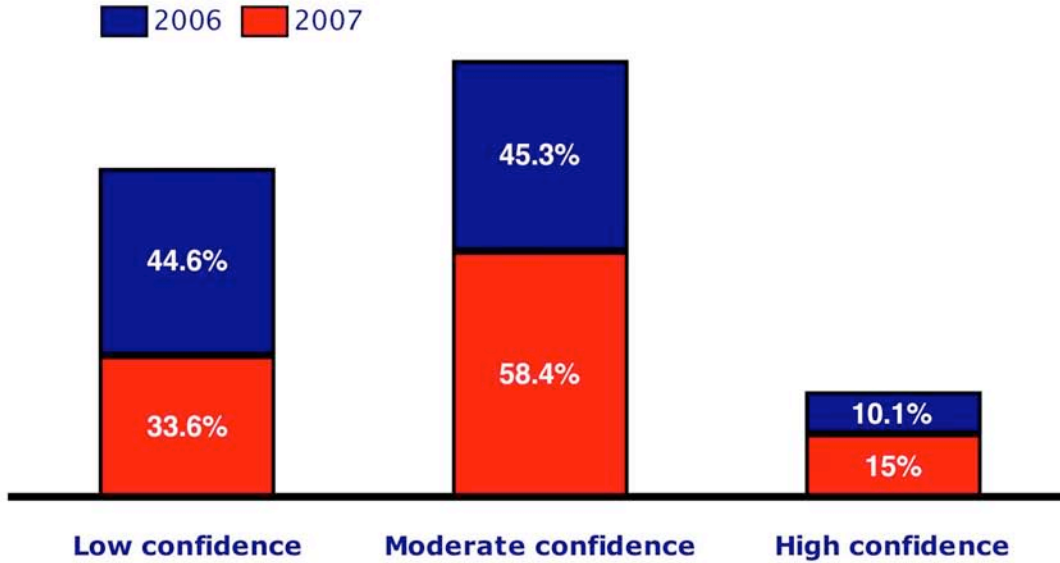


Figure 5.3: More Believe Conflicts Are Disclosed

**Confidence that healthcare bloggers disclose conflicts of interest
(2006, n = 139; 2007, n = 101)***

Source: Envision Solutions, LLC; Trusted.MD

*"I don't know" responses not included in total.



VI. Final Thoughts

Insight:

Health blogging is no longer a mere hobby, but a major focus of many bloggers in the US and around the world.

The two studies outlined in this report illustrate how health blogging has come of age over the past several years. Once dominated by medical professionals, the health blogosphere has grown to incorporate a diverse range of people in the United States and around the world.

We also found that concerns about the credibility of health bloggers may be misplaced. While many bloggers continue to view content developed by their peers critically, most believe conflicts are routinely disclosed. Given this, we can be reasonably confident most health bloggers are operating trustworthily.

References

1. *Taking the Pulse of the Healthcare Blogosphere*. 2006, Envision Solutions, LLC, The Medical Blog Network: New York.
2. Bauza, M., *Is Dr. Blogger Telling Too Much?*, in *Detroit Free Press*. March 14, 2007: Detroit.
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5. Lagu, T., et al., *Content of Weblogs Written By Health Professionals*. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 2008. Epub ahead of print.

Methodology (US Online Survey)

Kelton Research conducted this Envisions Solutions study between August 11 and August 15, 2008, using an e-mail invitation and an online survey. Quotas were set to ensure reliable and accurate representation of the total US population. Kelton surveyed 2,000 Americans ages 18 and older.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of the variation is measurable and is affected by the number of interviews and the level of the percentages expressing the results.

In this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that a survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 2.2 percentage points from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.

Methodology (Global Online Survey)

This online survey of an active population of health bloggers was fielded from August 27 to October 15, 2007. Survey participants were notified about the study via press releases, blog posts, and e-mail.

To increase the reliability of the study, researchers opened the poll only to individuals and organizations that devote at least 30% of posts on their Weblogs to healthcare-related topics.

A total of 138 healthcare bloggers took at least a portion of the survey. Statistics are based on the number of people who answered specific questions. Sometimes percentages do not add up to 100 because multiple responses were provided to certain queries. Because this analysis is based on a non-randomized convenience sample, it is not appropriate to conduct inferential analysis (i.e., measures of association and significance testing) of the data.

About Kelton Research

Kelton Research is a full service market research consultancy with offices in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington DC. Kelton serves as a strategic partner to both Fortune 500 corporations and smaller companies, utilizing a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to drive tactical recommendations for clients. More information on Kelton Research can be found at www.keltonresearch.com.

About Trusted.MD

Trusted.MD Network (<http://trusted.md>) is a social networking service designed to empower trust-based relationships between healthcare consumers, professionals, and organizations. Free membership offers individuals personal publishing, search, communication and reputation management tools. Healthcare organizations can sponsor private spaces around common interests and affiliations to engage and recruit their membership. Trusted.MD Network is also the world's largest community of health and medical bloggers. Register for a free membership today.