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Moderation Management Online: An Interview with Kurt Schnakenberg

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Introduction

One of the major milestones in the history of recovery support has been the dramatic growth of online resources for people seeking help for the resolution of alcohol and other drug related problems. I first met Kurt Schnakenberg in November 2002 during my first visit to the Moderation Management (MM) office in New York City. What I most vividly recall from that conversation was Kurt's passion for getting resources about the moderation option through the Internet. In July 2013, I had the pleasure of revisiting Kurt to review the progress made over this past decade. Please join us in this engaging discussion.

Early Involvement in MM

Bill White: Kurt, how and when did you first get involved with MM?

Kurt Schnakenberg: I was working for a company by Wall Street, drinking a lot and trying to have a relationship with a woman I wanted to marry, and it wasn't working out. A lot of difficulties in our relationship revolved around my drinking. She encouraged me to find a solution to the problem and I went to AA but didn't feel that AA was a solution for me. Then, in the Fall of 1997, I found that there was a Moderation Management Meeting in New York on 72nd Street, and I started going to it. When I went to my first meeting, I couldn't believe that people would actually drink that little as expressed by the Moderation Management drinking limits. But I plunged in and decided to do the program. I eventually did a 30 [30 days of abstinence], which was successful, but the problem was coming off the 30. For 30 days, I'd taken the position, drinking, bad; not drinking, good, and I had done that. So, why would I want to drink again? But I did eventually have another beer and came off the 30 and, over time, accepted the limits. The program worked for me and made my relationship with the woman who became my wife possible. We did get married. We have a son. We have a house in New Jersey. My life has worked out very well. And I have to give MM credit because without coming to some resolution of my drinking problem, it would have been impossible for us to have this marriage and the life we now share together.

Early Service Work in MM

Bill White: When did you first begin to get involved in helping build MM as an organization?

Kurt Schnakenberg: Around the same time that I was feeling fairly successful with the program, the Audrey Kishline incident occurred [MM founder Audrey Kishline's involvement in

an alcohol-related crash that killed two people], and it appeared that MM was going to collapse. MM was under so much attack. The early MM organization was always rather tenuous, and it revolved around Audrey. With Audrey out of the picture, it just seemed that MM would drift off into the ether and no longer exist. But the people who I had been going to MM meetings with started meeting at the (former) Olympic Diner down the block on 72nd Street and began a discussion about how we might move MM forward. The new MM workbook, *Responsible Drinking*, authored by several alumni, was coming out and we felt that the book could help increase membership and help hold the organization together. We managed to get MM back on its feet with the help of the Harm Reduction Coalition downtown. James Cannon, who served as MM's Executive Director for several years, was a major part of the rebuilding effort. It is a struggle to put together a non-profit and keep it functioning. We've gone through a number of very well-qualified and very respectable executive directors. Some have been former members of Moderation Management, and some have been professionals in the recovery field. Each time, we keep coming back to the consensus that we must be lay-led to maintain our legitimacy in the world. Currently, the management of the organization consists strictly of our members. Some of us may have advanced degrees or doctorates, but it's not in anything relating to the field of alcohol abuse. We are attempting to keep MM going and move it forward and promote our message in spite of the fact that we always appear to be in dire financial straits.

MM Goes Online

Bill White: Kurt, tell me the beginning story of MM's presence online. I know you were involved quite a bit in that early effort.

Kurt Schnakenberg: MM had a fairly basic website early on. I thought that the MM group in New York should have its own website, so I put together a website for them. Audrey and I talked at some point about me formally doing more work for the organization, but that was close to the time the incident occurred and nothing really came of that. When James Cannon took over MM, he wanted to further develop the website. Now, at that time, the website had a lot of content that was carefully collected and groomed. So, we basically picked up the existing website and we plumbed the back end to make it into an SSI website with SHTML pages. That allowed us to gradually insert new content and automations and add a number of new features, including most notably, our *ABSTAR* Program.

ABSTAR – MM's drink counting program – was started as an Excel spreadsheet. Copies of the spreadsheet were distributed among participants, but the content of the master spreadsheet was updated when people would send e-mail messages to the *ABSTAR* administrators. It was an ineffective way to maintain the thing, but it was a low-tech way to communicate within the kind of service that *ABSTAR* represents. *ABSTAR* is now a web page that can show your drinking history to the viewing public. People who are involved in the program can also see how you are doing and it gives direct feedback that we feel is very effective in modifying behavior.

The entire *ABSTAR* program taken online was much more effective than the Excel spreadsheet. I wrote a Perl program that basically took the spreadsheet and imitated it as a webpage. It included the ability for users to have individual log-ins, enter their monthly information and have that incorporated into the public web page or spreadsheet – or not, and remain private. You could have *ABSTAR* private or you could have *ABSTAR* public, the

latter revealing your numbers to the public. If you did not want your numbers to be public, you would not ask to have your rows made public, and you could then use the system privately. So the root of the *ABSTAR* program is that it gives people a way to use the internet to list their drink counts and for these drink counts to be made very public on the publically accessible *ABSTAR* page, which is also at www.moderation.org/abstar or at <http://abstar.org>.

The original *ABSTAR* program has been rewritten several times although the fundamental programming remains the same. It's getting far more use now than we ever intended. Browsers are better. Computers have more memory. So we haven't gotten too many complaints that the page is collapsing when people try to view it, which is great since these have become incredibly complex pages.

Bill White: For some of our readers who may not have visited the site yet, I wonder if you could describe some of the other tools or resources that are now on the site?

Kurt Schnakenberg: One of the original online tools that Moderation Management worked with was a LISTSERV system. What we call our "Online Community" was an important part of Moderation Management from the very beginning. Now, LISTSERV is an older technology: it's basically a "push" e-mail system that you subscribe to and when somebody sends an e-mail message to the server, that server will reflect that e-mail message out to all the subscribers of that service. The entire e-mail message is reflected, including the e-mail address, which means that some conditions of anonymity are not available. But a LISTSERV is such a basic functional system, we have thousands of users who receive these messages every day. It's a popular system that is an important component of our online offerings. There are practical limits to how many we can serve with a LISTSERV and we are now pushing those limits, but we regularly lose subscribers each month and gain subscribers each month so it's maintained a balance. <http://www.moderation.org/onlinegroups.shtml>

We also added a Forum several years ago at <http://forum.moderation.org>. It is our newest electronic service. The forum offers greater anonymity than the LISTSERV because the only thing that people can take from a post is a forum user name, not an e-mail address. The content on the Forum is not as ephemeral as on the LISTSERV. But for us, the Forum involves significant amounts of additional administrative tasks and has created a constant battle with spammers. There is a Public component to the Forum, which is currently locked. Subscribers get to see all the rich content that our users have been putting in it for the past few years. The forum is also used as a support tool for Dr. Reid Hester's "Moderate Drinking" program.

Bill White: What can you tell me about the volume or characteristics of those who are visiting the MM site?

Kurt Schnakenberg: Well, we have regular reports that we produce on the website, which are quite interesting. The reports provide the total sessions and number of page views. We get tens of thousands of page views each month. We can identify the popular pages and links through which people got to our site, but I cannot tell you that we have X number of single white females, etcetera.

Bill White: What about location, is the MM site primarily used by people in the US or internationally?

Kurt Schnakenberg: We have a strong international presence, but it remains fundamentally a US-based program. We do have people who have agreed to run MM meetings in places as exotic as Thailand. We have had a meeting in Australia and currently have overseas meetings in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany. We have a number of users from South Africa who've been active on our services.

Bill White: Kurt, has the online activity replaced the face-to-face meetings or do you see the online activity as supplementing face-to-face meetings?

Kurt Schnakenberg: I feel personally that we need both. Face-to-face meetings are important for MM and were our original method for presenting our program. We have a new Program Director, and we are working to re-energize our face-to-face meeting development; however, the online component has either been growing or maintained a steady audience. The face-to-face meetings have proven more difficult to sustain. Even successful meetings sometimes fade. The problems that people are often dealing with in MM are hopefully not lifelong problems. They have a beginning and an end. When somebody feels that they have a control on their drinking problem and that they've achieved some sort of balance in their life, they often pursue activities outside of Moderation Management and point their life in a different direction.

Bill White: I'm wondering if there's an average length of time that you see that happening in terms of people participating and then disengaging?

Kurt Schnakenberg: It appears that nine months is about the time from introduction and commitment to the program to the time when people feel that they can step away from it. Often, we have people who come in to the program, feel they're successful with it, go away and come back several years later and say, "I need a refresher." But nine months seems to be about the average life span of many members' participation in our programs.

Future of MM Online

Bill White: Have you given thought to what the MM online program might look like a decade from now with all the technology moving so quickly?

Kurt Schnakenberg: We're trying to experiment with it, and we have thought about it. Adding the forum was important to move away from dependence on the LISTSERV. But we've added other services that didn't go so well. For example, our chat room seemed like a great idea, but is just unable to service a significant number of users. We're just not getting good responses from it, although we have a commitment to maintain chat as an offering. So I'm not sure what is going to draw people to MM online. I know the internet is a powerful engine for moving MM forward and for communicating our program. It is hard to predict which direction this will come from. I can see, based on our web reports, that we are getting good responses to unexpected areas of our program. For example, our BAC tables page is very popular, and that's often an entrance page for people to encounter MM for the first time. We are looking at ways to expand our online services. We have not expanded with social media so far. Our efforts on Facebook have not been that popular. We're considering Twitter but the nature of Twitter as a medium is a little

difficult for us, and we're still trying to determine if that is what we could consider a therapeutic environment. We tend to be as an institution a little bit conservative, so we're monitoring our options. If we feel that a service is appropriate, we will consider it.

Personal Reflections on MM

Bill White: Kurt, what do you think has been MM's most important achievement over the course of the years you've been involved with it?

Kurt Schnakenberg: MM's most important achievement is we exist to give people an alternative to a life of alcohol abuse without demanding abstinence. This makes our program easier to approach. Basically, if people know that MM exists, we have succeeded. MM's survival is itself a goal. The fact that we exist is an indicator of continued success. We have also had organizations, such as NIAAA, use elements of our program within their own drinking guidelines, and that has given us a certain degree of satisfaction.

Bill White: Given the time you've had to observe people using MM, have you changed your views on for whom MM is appropriate or inappropriate?

Kurt Schnakenberg: It's very hard to say from an individual standpoint that one should not try to take a personally responsible approach to your drinking as an element of self-discovery. The essence of the MM program is, "We don't have the answer to your drinking problem. You have the answer to your drinking problem and if you work at it, you will find the answer, one way or another." There's a continuum of successful outcomes in MM. There's the option of lifetime abstinence, and we are not opposed to that choice. Some of our most successful members who continue to participate with our programs and administrative and volunteer roles are currently abstinent. And there are other people who have issues that they just find themselves unable to resolve with MM's help and hopefully we can help them seek professional help.

I want to be clear, I don't do program. I work on the technical side and I'm strictly administrative, so I am speaking out of my personal observations. MM invites people to find their own answers and believes that there's a range of acceptable solutions. We want people to find an outcome that will bring their life into balance, whatever that outcome happens to be. Before an individual approaches the program, we can't say to them, "Oh, based on this characteristic or that characteristic, we don't believe that you'll be successful with the program." We believe our program has something to offer to everybody, even if it's finding out that you're not going to achieve your personal goals through the MM program and that you have to seek them elsewhere. We support all steps that lead to finding a solution to an individual's problem.

There are wheels within wheels on this moderate drinking issue and there are some people who do better managing their drinking through personal recognizance than others. I think that time will tell that there are some people who will do better on moderation programs than others; however, it's not our role to classify people. If they don't get started down the road, they'll never end up with any kind of successful conclusion. The entire world of alcohol and drinking problems is quite large, varied, and not well managed in the American puritan landscape. I hope that MM is a gesture of sanity in a world that seems to promote alcohol abuse more than encourage natural restraint and responsible use. And in saying that, I want to emphasize that

MM has no association with any breweries or alcohol producers and, if I have any say in it, they never will.

Bill White: What do you personally feel best about in terms of your own involvement in working with people through MM?

Kurt Schnakenberg: When I first came to MM, I personally was in a rather dark place in my life, and I was not dealing properly with my issues with alcohol. By finding MM and agreeing to take responsibility for my problems and work to resolve them, I found something that I thought should be there for others. I feel good about helping make this option available and keeping the light of MM alive and functional and communicating with the world. I also feel I am giving a legacy to other members of my family who might be encountering this. I understand some of these issues do run in families. So for people in the generations to come, we're going to be able to offer them something that is a middle way for resolving lifestyle problems with alcohol before they become destructive.

Bill White: Let me ask you a final question: what are your personal hopes for the future of MM?

Kurt Schnakenberg: My hope for MM in the future is the same as my hope for it today. That it will continue to exist, and will continue to offer an option. That it will be known as an option. My hope is that more people hear about Moderation Management or programs like it. I also hope that when I can't do this anymore, others will be there to pick it up and carry it on.

Bill White: Kurt, thank you for taking this time to share your experience with MM.

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