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HEALTHCARE MARKETING + COMMUNICATIONS

Social Media, Healthcare & HIPAA
How the Web Is Changing the Culture of Medicine

by Casey Quinlan, Partner, WellCentrix

Electronic health record (EHR) technology is being deployed across the United States as part of both health care reform and the American Recovery & Re-investment Act (ARRA). As the healthcare industry collaborates with local, state, and federal agencies to build health IT systems that allow for the exchange of patient data, patients are engaged in their own technology-enabled conversation on the web using social media. They're talking about their experiences with health conditions, with doctors, with hospitals, with clinics.

As the medical industry works to build a technology-driven model for itself, patients are simultaneously working to change the culture of medicine – to be advocates on their own behalf, engaged directly in the management of their care. These e-Patients – "e" representing electronic, engaged, empowered– are the healthcare customers of the 21st century.

Patients have been using the web to research and manage their health needs since its inception. In 1999, a survey of 1,000 patients conducted by a primary care practice in Providence RI showed that 53% of the respondents used the web to research medical information.

Health care providers using social media need to educate their patients about what they can expect from their practices in terms of privacy protection and in terms of online interactions.

By 2004, a Pew Internet study revealed that every day, 7 million American adults searched the web for medical and health information. At an industry event in February 2010, over-the-counter and prescription pharma giant Johnson & Johnson shared statistics on consumer viewing of YouTube medical videos that showed health as the #5 search term on the site – beating out shopping (#6) and travel (#10).

What does this mean for the healthcare provider community? It means that patients – whom we will refer to here as customers – are looking for information and acting on what they find. Providers must join the conversation to avoid becoming reactive, rather than proactive, toward the rising population of customers who are looking for healthcare information and engagement online.

Customers are building communities around chronic conditions – there are 1,200 pages on Facebook dedicated to health issues from Alzheimer's to zits – and they are also looking for information on, and engagement with, healthcare providers in their area. Angie's List and Yelp offer customer reviews on doctors and hospitals, and Google searches on a doctor will often return starred reviews – positive

and negative – along with contact information for that doctor.

Physicians are participating in online conversations among themselves. Manhattan Research reported in its Taking the Pulse™ results that 84% of doctors are engaging each other online as part of their clinical workflow, and that 71% of physicians are interested in or already using online physician networks.

The next – and critical – step for Health 2.0 is for healthcare and its customers to fully connect and engage online. To make that happen, both sides of the conversation need to develop clear rules of engagement – particularly regarding HIPAA compliance rules about patient data security – in order to take full advantage of the community-building and education opportunities social media presents for healthcare.

Developing Rules of Engagement

Healthcare providers – physicians, hospitals, clinics – who want to engage with their customer base online must build some clear ground rules before launching any social media efforts.

First, be aware that anything you or your staff posts on the web is visible to everyone on the web. Engaging directly with your customers is a good thing. Discussing their test results on Facebook, or offering medical advice on Twitter, is the road to social media suicide.

> *The physician's primary role in social media is to serve as team leader, to help patients vet information they find online and to help them find online communities.*

Your approach needs to be "engage and educate", offering timely and helpful information: back-to-school health checklists; healthy-baby tips; how to manage diabetes or hypertension; how to avoid getting the flu; health screening tips for kids, adults, and the elderly. If one of your customers engages with you directly, and asks you questions about his/her protected health information (PHI), ask them to contact you directly by phone, or via your secure patient portal. Do not offer medical advice online – educate, don't diagnose.

Here are our recommendations for setting up a social media platform for your practice:

- First, decide what you want to accomplish. Using social media won't fill your waiting room. It can, however, increase customer loyalty to you and your practice or facility, and it can become a referral source. Decide what your message is, and how you want to build a community around your expertise and your practice by sharing that message. Build a persona for your practice, and stick to that persona – don't share photos of what you're eating for lunch, unless you're a dietician.

- Train your staff, and re-visit the training regularly, on the dos and don'ts of healthcare social media and HIPAA compliance. Develop a clear list of what can be shared, and what can't; create a topic list with your team and make sure you all stick to it.

- Set up a listening-post system, using Google Alerts or a similar search aggregator, for your name, the name of your practice, and keywords related to your specialty. Monitor it daily to be aware of what your community and your customers are saying. Use that message intelligence to inform your social media conversations. Respond thoughtfully to comments, particularly negative ones – invite them to have a private conversation, don't let them argue with you in public.

- If you do only one thing on social media, make it a blog. Educate your community with timely information, share your opinion on healthcare policy, encourage your staff to participate in posting their helpful healthcare tips. Do not blog about specific cases, or reveal any customer data.

- If you use Twitter, share information that is useful to your followers, and to the followers you'd like to attract. Don't share information that would identify a customer, and don't engage directly with customers. If you share a link to an article, or a research study, don't point it out to specific customers.

- If you use Facebook, create a fan page for your practice or facility. Encourage your customers to "like" that page, and be highly circumspect about friending customers on your personal page. Keep your personal page privacy settings as restricted as possible, either "only me" or "friends only". Keep all your brand-related Facebook posts on your practice's fan page.

- LinkedIn is an ideal way to connect with peers – your public profile will be visible in search results, so you'll want to set up your profile to showcase your professional expertise and associations. LinkedIn Groups are also a great place to connect with colleagues and peers across the globe, and to share your thought leadership. Again, do not share any customer-related information.

The key is to educate and inform without directly engaging with customers about their specific health questions. Invite them to contact you privately and directly – NOT via a direct message on Twitter or Facebook, but by phone, by scheduling an office appointment, or via your secure patient portal.

Listening Is Critical

Healthcare providers, from small practices to large healthcare systems, who do not monitor what people are saying about them on the web are risking their brand's equity – their reputation – in the marketplace.

In the previous section, I mentioned setting up a listening-post system with Google Alerts. Even if you decide against using social media in your practice or facility, that doesn't mean that your customers won't be talking about you on the web.

Google your name, or the name of your practice. It's highly likely that the search results will include both a Google Maps listing, as well as reviews of your practice. Not monitoring those conversations can mean that if a prospective customer Googles you, and sees less-than-positive reviews, you'll lose that customer.

When you launch a social media platform for your practice or facility, it's critical that you have that listening post in place. You also must monitor blog comments, Twitter @replies, Facebook wall posts, and LinkedIn messages. Using tools like Google Alerts and Twitter/Facebook lists will give you a quick look at online conversations about you and your brand in real time, and let you participate effectively in those conversations.

If you choose to stay away from social media, you still must listen to the conversations taking place online about you and your practice. Not listening means risking damage to your reputation.

Build a Team to Build a Healthy Community

Your social media team will be you, your staff, and your customers. You and your staff are passionate about helping your customers improve or retain their health. Your customers are interested in getting or staying healthy. Engaging online can improve customer outcomes, improve what is often called "compliance" but could more accurately be tagged as "engagement". Two examples of improved outcomes:

Physicians MUST be engaged. Your patients are talking about you – you'll be irrelevant in five years if you don't engage in, at minimum, social media reputation management. That's were doctors should start, and build from there.

• The Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal & Economic Policy Studies conducted a research study of 7,000 senior citizens who had been diagnosed with depression. The results revealed that a 20% reduction in the depression classification occurred in those patients who used the web to connect with both other depression suffers and with healthcare experts.

• Kaiser Permanente studied 35,423 patients diagnosed with hypertension and diabetes, two of the most common and costly chronic conditions in the US, and discovered that those patients who connected with their doctors online via email had 2.0-6.5% better numbers on blood sugar, cholesterol and blood pressure control.

The key is deciding how you want to use social media, educating yourself on the tools you decide to use, training your staff on your social media rules of engagement, and then inviting your customers and your community to engage with you online. An additional benefit of engaging online and building a community around your practice and expertise is that it can help establish you and your team as thought leaders in your healthcare specialty.

Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliance is usually a determining factor in whether a healthcare provider will use social media, or opt out. Getting some advice from your HIPAA compliance officer, and building your rules of engagement with HIPAA compliance in mind, is critical to avoiding the gimlet eye of the HIPAA cops. The fines for PHI data breaches have risen to a draconian level – up to $1.5 million – making clear policies and procedures for social media a critical requirement.

David Harlow, a Boston attorney who specializes in healthcare law and is active on social media as @healthblawg, offered this advice in a post on Dr. Howard Luks' blog:

As I tell my clients: You don't want to be a test case. Even if you win, you lose. In order to steer clear of potential liabilities, health care providers using social media need to educate their patients about what they can expect from their practices in terms of privacy protection and in terms of on-line interactions. They should have clearly stated policies and procedures posted on their Facebook pages, etc., announcing that they do not accept "friend requests" from patients. Given the multitude of platforms and options available to providers, however, there is no need to eliminate all possible interaction. Patients seeking to "friend" a physician on a personal page should instead be encouraged to become a "fan" of the physician's practice page on Facebook, or take an analogous step on other networks.

Build your team with clear goals, and clear policies and procedures. The #1 goal should be offering timely, useful information that will improve everyone's health, and keep your practice healthy, too.

> *Never forget that everyone can read what you post, and that everything you post can and will be used against you.*

Success Stories

Two examples of physicians using social media well are Dr. Howard Luks, an orthopedist in New York, and Dr. Gregory Buford, a plastic surgeon in Colorado.

Dr. Luks started using Twitter in 2009, and is an active participant in the weekly #hcsm (health care social media) Tweetchat on Sunday nights. He blogs on Posterous, and is an advocate for physician/provider use of social media. Here are some of his recommendations:

- The physician's primary role in social media is to serve as team leader, to help patients vet information they find online and to help them find online communities. You CANNOT interact directly with your patients on social media.

- For practitioners who want to engage directly with peers online, there are IMedExchange.com and Sermo.com, online communities for physicians only. On these sites they can speak freely without speaking in public, sharing content and thoughts with colleagues off the public radar. Many physicians are not Health 2.0 savvy; IMX and Sermo are helping them ramp up.

- Physicians MUST be engaged. Your patients are talking about you – you'll be irrelevant in five years if you don't engage in, at minimum, social media reputation management. That's were doctors should start, and build from there.

- Post timely, evidence-based information: what to expect from your 1st visit; what to bring; how to prepare. This leads to a meaningful, actionable information exchange.

Dr. Gregory Buford, a Colorado plastic surgeon who uses Twitter and Facebook to engage with his customers and community online, offers these insights and suggestions based on his experience using social media:

- My biggest surprise is how effective social media has proven to be. I have seen a tremendous jump in traffic to my website since beginning a focused social media campaign.

- I track all referral sources using Google Analytics and have found a pretty solid return so far from social media.

> *My biggest surprise is how effective social media has proven to be.*

- When I lecture to other plastic surgeons on practice management and mention social media, I am usually met with blank stares from the older physicians. However, the younger surgeons get it and are eager to learn how to maximize the use of this very cost effective marketing tool.

- Never forget that everyone can read what you post, and that everything you post can and will be used against you.

Both Dr. Luks and Dr. Buford can serve as models for clinicians looking for best-practices on how to use social media effectively in healthcare.

Steps to Success

Here is our step-by-step guide to successfully using social media in healthcare:

1. Decide what your brand message is, and how you want to share that message.

2. Educate yourself on the social media applications you plan to use.

3. Develop "rules of engagement" for online conversations. Also develop rules about who on your staff may post as the "voice" for your practice.

4. Create a solid training program for the staff members you plan on including in your practice's social media program, with particular attention paid to PHI and HIPAA compliance rules.

5. Build your listening-post system, and have at least two people monitoring it daily.

6. Designate a response team, and create a "how to respond" chart for both positive and negative comments and conversations.

7. Listen twice as much as you speak on social media – listen to your community, offer them solid, actionable information, and listen to their responses.

8. Do not engage directly with individual customers online. Encourage them to contact your office, to make an appointment, or to talk to you via your secure patient portal.

9. Do not offer specific medical advice or diagnoses to individual customers online.

10. Educate, inform, engage. Repeat daily.

Sources

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