Engaging Staff With Social Media

Using these tools can help increase customer, physician and employee satisfaction.

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Hospital and other healthcare workplaces haven't changed dramatically since I entered the profession more than 30 years ago. While healthcare has seen an infusion of technology and tools to help improve communications and work processes, the nature of our communications, collaborations and connections has followed more traditional workplace norms.

However, this status is changing rapidly. Today's hospital staffs are reaching out and making new connections, networking and collaborating online using social networking technologies. They may have learned about and started using the technologies in their personal life, but more and more are applying them in their efforts to connect professionally with peers and healthcare consumers.

Successful leaders understand the importance of communication and collaboration during challenging times and apply the technology that allows them to reach out to physicians, employees, volunteers and others more effectively and efficiently. They recognize that the low-cost—but potentially high-touch—social media applications do fit into their strategic initiatives and, when correctly applied, will improve the

quality of information collected and the efficiency at which it is gathered.

A generational shift is occurring in today's healthcare workforce. Younger employees and physicians have more collaborative attitudes than their predecessors in the workplace, and more desire to have their voices heard without being confined by hierarchies and corporate bureaucracy. Effective leaders transform their workplaces to accommodate emerging work patterns and expectations of the new generation. That means well-managed organizations will be prepared for modern workforces and dynamic transformations as baby boomers retire and millennials become fully integrated into the healthcare labor force.

According to Meredith Sarringhaus, author of "The Great Divide: Social Media's Role in Bridging Healthcare's Generational Shift," published in the July/August issue of *Journal of Healthcare Management*, a new organizational culture and a sense of engagement among both young and older workers will ultimately advance the goals of the organization.

Wiki technologies help organizations capture existing knowledge

and create virtual workspaces on a secure intranet. They help work groups and other collaborative teams quickly organize, share information and co-create deliverable products, such as plans, policies, protocols, and guides. Wiki applications can reduce the amount of in-person meeting time and the number of circulating emails for projects, especially when participants are dispersed among multiple worksites or have alternate work schedules. Activities that may be aided by such technologies include the following:

- Joint Commission survey preparations
- Employee, volunteer, board member or medical staff committee activities
- Patient and community advisory council activities
- Engagement of stakeholders for internal discussion of issues or to solicit feedback
- Building resident and/or student community interaction and support
- Functional or multidisciplinary project team planning for environmental changes and new strategies

The workforce of the future will be comfortable with the less costly and more effective peer-production and documentation methods that wikis, social bookmarking and other social networking technologies offer.

Future workers will also appreciate the application of tools that make more efficient use of staff time, such as Boston University's Discharge Advocate (see the Satisfying Your Customers column in the May/June 2011 issue of *Healthcare Executive*), or that provide more entertaining and engaging education, training and communications for their patients and themselves.

Twitter Saves the Day at Advocate Health Care

Advocate Health Care is a large system based in Illinois and is composed of 12 hospitals, 250 sites and 30,000 employees (associates). The organization not only allows staff to access Facebook from their desktops, it also encourages them to link to their social networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. But this policy wasn't adopted without forethought and planning.

Advocate is leveraging its large workforce, engaging it and shaping the new Advocate experience to mirror the way the world is talking—with new modes of communication. Associates receive training on how to engage with the communities they serve and about privacy and security requirements, including limitations imposed by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996.

Staff members are using internal social media tools to share positive patient comments and stories they hear about patients' good experiences with the organization. Those comments are distributed internally to staff and, when appropriate, also incorporated by communications staff into press releases, on the

organization's Facebook page, and so forth, to share with the community.

Advocate physicians are melded strategically into social media outlets: blogging about new technologies and techniques, sharing best practices and offering preventive care advice to consumers who value these new connection opportunities. Physicians' stories are considered for inclusion in both traditional and social media.

Advocate also promotes social media use with its employees and physicians by distributing postcards that explain why staff should tweet or use Facebook. It conducts social media tours to teach employees how to post and tweet. Some older associates are still getting accustomed to the new ways to communicate, while most younger employees have readily embraced it.

Advocate has been using internal, secure Twitter accounts for disseminating emergency codes (e.g., "code triage") at each location in the system, but a recent emergency helped several physicians understand the value and power of Twitter. A power outage caused by a storm affected some of Advocate's medical centers, and Twitter was used to communicate with patients about appointment changes. While the locations experienced some disruption, many patients and physicians were able to continue with their appointments at alternate locations.

As comfort with these new technologies increases, more and more departments are asking for disease- or condition-specific Twitter accounts to facilitate their communications with patients and the community on designated health topics.

Recruitment and More at Essentia Health

Essentia Health, based in Duluth, Minn., is made up of 17 hospitals and 67 clinics in three states. Its North Dakota facilities have been engaged with social media for a couple of years and in that time have learned that Facebook can be a strong physician recruitment tool and education medium. Videos posted online capture the essence of the workplace and engage recruits in the organization's effort to convey why Essentia is a great place to work.

Its blog is the driving force behind the social media strategy and has become the go-to source of information during floods, snow storms and other crisis management events. Employees now expect to find the latest information on the blog and often report at meetings that they are already aware of news and changes. Emergency department (ED) physicians appreciate the opportunity to react immediately to trends they observe during ED visits and to intervene with information to prevent the spread of illness or reduce injuries—all through the Web-based technologies. The Cancer Team is planning to invite its consumers to engage in and provide feedback on a closed "invitation only" site.

Employees and physicians have embraced social media as a tool that can be used to monitor online conversations. Being aware of the conversations people are having online about the organization allows staff to join in the conversation to help provide information or, in the case of any negative comments, help resolve patients' concerns. In this way they are able to exercise transparency,

which makes employees and physicians feel proud to work for their hospital. Board members receive information gathered from satisfaction surveys and also get reports of what is happening "on the street." They use this new information to differentiate themselves in the competitive marketplace.

Now that Essentia Health is comfortable with using social media, the organization has noted a decrease in marketing costs, and it is preparing to increase its stake in social media. It recently released a mobile application to facilitate access to its *Daily Dose* newsletter by its 11,000 employees and 1,500 physicians and other credentialed practitioners.

Blanket IT policies that prevent access to social media sites communicate to employees that they really aren't trusted to act properly. They also limit access to social media, which may hinder staff members' ability to perform their job functions more efficiently and effectively. Rather than ignoring them, healthcare leaders should see that social media tools can help employees listen, learn and build upon their organization's collective knowledge with new relationships and increased trust.

Social media is no longer about using the *cool technology*. Instead, it is about making the tools needed by physicians, employees, volunteers and contractors available so they can perform their jobs in today's workplace and meet the expectations of their customers. ▲

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Editor's note: Christina Beach Thielst, FACHE, is the author of *Social Media in Healthcare: Connect, Communicate, Collaborate* (Health Administration Press, 2010) and the companion self-study course *Connect, Communicate, Collaborate: Exploring New Media*. For more information or to order, visit **ache.org/HAP**.