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Using Social Media to Engage Patients

Many tools exist to connect, communicate and build loyalty.

It isn't enough anymore to just have a Web presence.

Healthcare organizations—today and in the future—are building Web visibility, which is greatly aided by social media content. This increased use of social media will transform the relationships between healthcare organizations and consumers, as opportunities for bi-directional conversations take the place of simple broadcast messages.

Social media is about engaging consumers rather than just pushing messages to them in a way your organization believes is desirable. For example, rather than posting information for patients and hospital updates on the hospital's website, social media tools, such as a blog or wiki, can be used to enhance transparency and engage patients and the community—all while soliciting their ideas, suggestions and feedback on the latest project.

Engaging With “e-Patients”

Healthcare consumers have been taking a more active role in gathering and sharing their health information, and they are demanding decision-making tools to help them plan and execute their care. In his 2007 paper *e-Patients: How They Can Help Us*

Heal Healthcare, the late Tom Ferguson, MD, a physician, author and researcher, describes how electronically savvy patients use the Internet as a health resource “to enhance their knowledge and ability to care for themselves.” According to Ferguson, e-patients:

- study up on relevant diseases and conditions
- look for better treatment options and providers
- compare costs to assist with their healthcare spending decisions
- provide other patients with invaluable medical assistance and support
- serve as important collaborators and advisers to their clinicians

These e-patients become more engaged with those organizations that offer opportunities for active participation and then promote—to their family and friends—the sites and services that best fit their needs. They will continue to consult traditional sources, such as trusted healthcare professionals, but will also go online to search for information.

We can expect the e-patients of today and the future to take an active role in their healthcare education and decisions so they can:

- do as much for themselves and their families as they can
- ask for healthcare they and their families need
- say “no” to care they and their families don't need

But, as Ferguson explains, it is “not a matter of automating earlier forms of medical practice and clinical processes, the underlying nature of healthcare itself must change.”

Social media offer mechanisms to accommodate the needed change while allowing users to build networks and start conversations with those who share their interests and experiences. Social media deliver what customers want: personalized information, convenience and tools to help them plan and execute any time of the day or night.

Reaching a Wide Audience

Social networking isn't just for the young—online communities are attracting older and broader audiences. According to 2010 research by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, the next generation of seniors (age 50 to 64) is the fastest growing segment of adults using social networking sites, and there is steady growth among those 65 and over.

Additionally, the rapid growth of mobile devices and smartphones provides access to information

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6:59 PM
A LIFE CHANGED

7:05 AM
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5:30 PM
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10:13 AM
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1:21 PM
A CLEAN, SANITIZED ENVIRONMENT

MAKING THE CONNECTION.

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while users are at home, at work or in transit. A recent jump in mobile device and smartphone adoption by more individuals is providing access to the Internet like never before.

At the same time, the current economic downturn is forcing CEOs to take a harder look at the

potential benefits of social media tools that are available and that can help transform their operating and organizational cultures. These low-cost, innovative applications are helping leaders solve today's communication and collaborative challenges. They also allow leaders to work through new networks to

engage key stakeholders rather than being confined by hierarchies and corporate bureaucracy.

Opportunities Abound

In my book *Social Media in Healthcare: Connect, Communicate, Collaborate* (Health Administration Press, 2010), I provide a number of examples of how innovative healthcare organizations are engaging their patients using social media. Some of these opportunities include:

Blogs. Blogs are great tools for patients to stay in touch with family and friends while undergoing unexpected or long-term care. For healthcare organizations, blogs are useful for reaching out to the general community or specific populations to inform and engage. A number of healthcare executives connect with their communities by keeping regular blogs. Examples include executives at Mendocino Coast District Hospital, Fort Bragg, Calif.; University of North Carolina Healthcare System; and Wilmington (Del.) Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

Microblogs. The most well-known version of this technology is Twitter. Microblogs can be an effective tool during emergency situations, when traditional communication methods may not be functioning. An organization can send out informative status "tweets" to the media and community, helping to reassure the public that your facility is still open and treating patients.

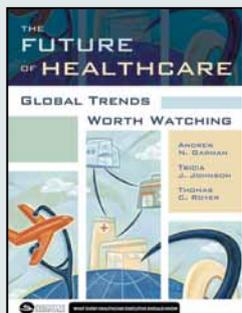
Consumers may be tweeting about their experiences at your facility, which provides an opportunity for you to monitor this feedback and learn

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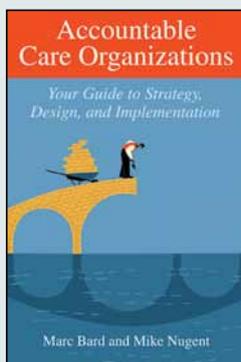
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from it. Reading what patients are tweeting about your organization may help you better recognize their needs and concerns. More importantly, it also gives you an easy way to respond and let those patients be heard.

Providers can also leverage these technologies to attract new patients and build loyalty. One fun application of microblogging technology I have seen involved transmission of “kick” messages (to Dad or grandparents) each time an unborn baby kicks in the mother’s womb.

Social networking sites. Virtual networking sites such as Facebook create online communities of support and are an excellent venue through which to engage consumers regarding specific conditions or diseases. One site I have seen uses online and mobile components to support users in their recovery from addiction. Some hospitals and insurance companies even incorporate the site in their patients’ aftercare plans and program offerings.

Physicians are also using social networking sites to enhance their practices by blending online communications with traditional patient visits. This is helping many physicians offer more convenient healthcare that is popular with patients and employers alike.

Virtual worlds and use of personalized avatars. These technologies can provide exceptional opportunities for consumer outreach and delivery of patient instructions, education and training because they entertain while educating or conveying information. Mayo Clinic and Massachusetts General Hospital are using virtual worlds to conduct classes and lectures

on a variety of health topics. Boston University School of Medicine is using a Patient Discharge Advocate avatar to walk patients through their discharge and aftercare plans.

Podcast, video cast and photo sharing. These technologies present a great opportunity to repackage

and broaden distribution of existing audio, video and digital picture files for education and information. These media enhance text messages and prove valuable for outreach to the visually or hearing impaired, those with limited reading skills or anyone who prefers multimedia.



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Widgets and apps. Healthcare organizations are creating consumer-friendly apps for those on the move. Ochsner Health System in New Orleans created a downloadable app with location, contact and ER wait time information.

Community Health Network in Indianapolis created Pillboxapp.com to help consumers and their caregivers better manage their medications on a smartphone. Chester County Hospital in West Chester, Pa., created a widget (a stand-alone application that can be installed and executed within a Web page) to facilitate individual self-assessments to help patients determine risk for conditions such as heart disease. And St. Louis Children's has an app to help parents make smart decisions on what level of care, if any, is needed and how to provide speedy symptom relief for minor illnesses or injuries.

Determining the Right Tools

Having the right people at the table

is key to implementing any of the above social media tools into your organization's communications strategy. A planning team that includes senior leadership, individuals familiar and active with social media technologies, IT staff, clinicians and representatives from departments related to the project will prove invaluable in ensuring that your organization selects the right tool for the right audience and right purpose. When possible, start your social media activities in ways your patients are already communicating and build on the success of each new application.

We haven't yet seen all of the ways social media technologies will be applied; however, now is the time to start learning and become familiar with the possibilities if you want to prepare to satisfy your customers. Those healthcare organizations that can successfully engage patients—in the ways patients want—will build tremendous trust for their organization and loyalty from 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.

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