

Social Media's Role in Healthcare

By Jodi Schafer

With the explosion of social media, healthcare organizations have to navigate a new frontier of social networking, blogging, bookmarking and news sites in order to increase their brand awareness and facilitate conversations with the customer. Because social media has been adopted by a critical mass of the population, it is important for organizations to have a social media presence.

Not convinced? Take the advice of Dr. Wes, practicing cardiologist (and active blogger) and "Google yourself." That's right. Type your name or the organization's name in Google's search box. What appears first? Your name/your organization's name or someone else's? Not there? How many pages down do you have to search to find something about yourself/your organization? As more and more people reach out to the web to find medical information or, more importantly, their doctor, physicians of all specialties and healthcare organizations should probably be asking, "Can I/we afford **not** to be connected with social media in one way or another?"

Physicians' Use of Social Media:

There are many reasons a physician may choose to create or enhance an online presence. Perhaps the number one reason is that patients *expect* it. The general population is using the internet to find a physician, read reviews/rankings of local providers and facilities, gather information on a specific disease or condition, research treatment options, and connect with patients suffering from similar ailments. Physicians want to have some control over what people will read and use their online presence to increase exposure. Engaging with patients electronically can also enhance a physician's reputation by generating goodwill and business for their practice. Physicians can join online physician forums to network with other physicians; bounce ideas off of each other, problem-solve, and spread the word on hot topics/events.

Physicians' use of social media and social networks is on the rise. According to a July, 2009 study by the Massachusetts Medical Society, physician's use of social media is growing rapidly across all age groups, including the 35-45 demographic and those 55 years and older. The percentage of physicians who have visited social networking sites has risen to 50% in just one year. Of those, 32% have joined a networking site themselves.

Physician Recruiters' Use of Social Media:

For physician recruiters, social media can aid in the sourcing, screening and hiring process. If more physicians are using this medium to communicate then it only makes sense that recruiters use these same online sources to locate and connect with them. In addition to creating brand recognition for your practice, hospital or health system among potential new hires, social media can also help target specific audiences that are difficult to reach by other means. Most medical school and training program enrollees have a profile on at least one social networking site. Tapping into these networks can help you reach both active candidates and passive job seekers (ones that you wouldn't find on a job board or in a CV database). These sites also allow recruiters to extend their reach globally without additional costs or efforts.

Social Media Options:

Social media can be classified into several categories: blogs, microblogs, social networks, social news, social bookmarking sites, and video/image sharing sites. Below are some of the main sites organizations are currently using to promote themselves and recruit new talent.

TWITTER: *A microblogging site that enables users to send “tweets” or messages of 140 characters or less. ** (Sixteen percent of Medical Opportunities’ members have a professional Twitter account.)*

FACEBOOK: *A social networking site where users can add friends, send messages, build their own profile and become “fans” of groups or organizations listed on the site. ** (Thirty-seven percent of Medical Opportunities’ members have a professional Facebook page.)*

YOUTUBE: *A video sharing website where users can share and upload new videos.*

LINKEDIN: *A social networking site for business professionals. It acts like an electronic rolodex of the user’s professional contacts, showing not only their network, but also the network of each of their contacts.*

The “Cost” of Social Media:

While most forms of social media are technically free, there is an indirect cost associated with the amount of time a person or organization spends to create and maintain their online presence. To ensure that an organization is getting a return on this time investment, it is advisable to develop a social media marketing plan and decide early on which resources will be allocated to managing the plan effectively.

When deciding whether or not to jump into the online world, it is important to weigh the costs against the potential benefits. However, with more and more people turning to the internet, organizations will not be able to watch from the sidelines for much longer.

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