The Social Media Train is Leaving the Station: Are Health Care Organizations On It?

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Health Enterprise Partners

Aggregating Investment for Mutual Benefit

Introduction

Facebook reached 750 million active users in July of 2011. 13 percent of American adults have a Twitter account. With its rapidly increasing prominence, social media has the potential to significantly impact health care organizations, serving as a communication, collaboration, and information platform. Additionally, individuals are increasingly turning online for instant access to health care information. Yet, the use of social media by hospitals and health plans has remained fairly limited, often for fear of the negative backlash from patients and providers and the inability to control the organization's message.

This white paper will provide a brief overview of the current state of social media in health care and offer best practices for organizations seeking to adopt and leverage social media tools. Health Enterprise Partners believes that, if used effectively, social media can serve as a significant differentiator for health care organizations, increasing customer acquisition and retention.

Increased Adoption

Social media, such as video, blogs, ratings, and reviews, often shared among a unique community, has grown from a recreational tool to a powerful medium for individuals and companies. As consumers begin to demand access to more information, including health care information, many are turning to social media. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, 41 percent of patients in the United States get health information from social media.[1]

Social networking applications in health care provide user-generated content geared toward a specific demographic, such as patient, physician, and company communities. Websites such as physician rating portals offer direct feedback from consumers. Sermo and Doximity serve as a platform for physicians to connect and exchange information. Similarly, PatientsLikeMe, CarePages and inspire.com offer targeted, closed communities, often revolving around specific disease states. These, and other websites, including dlife and I Move You provide wellness and disease management platforms in a community environment.

Social media also offers unique and dynamic sharing of health information. Often, this information comes from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube sites developed and updated by hospitals and health plans. Currently, 1,188 hospitals are using social media, with 1,018 on Facebook and 913 on Foursquare.[2] These organizations are increasingly using social media platforms as a means of gauging consumer experiences as well as for promotional, branding, and community outreach purposes.

Benefits

Social media encourages two-way participation in a way that traditional forms of media do not. The significant amount of user-generated content on social media websites, with patients and

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[1] Susannah Fox. Pew Research Center. The Social Life of Health Information. May 12, 2011.
[2] Ed Bennett. Hospital Social Networking List. June 8, 2011. < http://ebennett.org/hsnl/>

consumers commenting and reviewing organizations and relevant topics, provide an unparalleled level of interaction with the customer.

Organizations are also using social media as a means of sharing up-to-date, instant information on events, changes in the organization, and topics related to health care in a simple manner. Consumers are increasingly turning to health care providers and health plans for access to relevant health information, and social media is a valuable resource to directly provide this.

As patient satisfaction and customer service become more significant for hospitals and health plans, organizations can utilize social media to gain credible and instant feedback from their customers. According to a survey by a hospital market research firm, 57 percent of consumers said that a hospital's social media connections would strongly affect their decision to receive treatment at that facility.[3] This may be the result of the connection that social media provides on a personal, rather than corporate level. This connection can form a clear tie, one that improves customer retention. With such a direct, tangible impact, health care organizations should take advantage of leveraging this medium or risk quickly falling behind competitors.

Case Study: Inova Health System

In 2010, Inova Health System launched "Fit for 50," a web-based campaign to encourage those in the Washington, DC area to get in shape. Inova's campaign combined several best practices in leveraging social media. First, the campaign was part of an integrated marketing campaign designed to attract customers in a specific demographic. Second, the program allowed individuals to track their own fitness and wellness goals, encouraging interaction.

Additionally, the campaign was not merely a brand promotion for Inova, but instead a means of building trust and awareness within the community over a greater issue; once that trust was formed, Inova could then begin to leverage its Facebook and Twitter pages to reach out to its community regarding events , services, and information. Finally, tangible metrics, such as web site visits via Google Analytics, were incorporated into a CRM database to determine whether visitors were new customers, creating a path toward demonstrable return on investment (ROI).

How Health Care Organizations Can Catch Up:

The Necessity of an Online Presence: According to a 2009 study, health care companies, particularly managed care organizations, were significantly behind other Fortune 100 companies in the adoption of social media.[4] Only 20 percent of US hospitals have a social media presence, and a recent survey indicated that 81 percent of consumers believed that a hospital with a social media presence is cutting edge. Online information is shaping consumers' decisions; organizations who understand and leverage this will gain a competitive advantage. Mayo Clinic's recent launch of its own social networking website is a striking example.

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[3] YouGov Healthcare. Consumers' Use, Preferences and Expectations of Hospital Social Media. June 2011.
[4] Burston-Marsteller. Social Media Use by Fortune 100 Companies. July 29, 2009.

Even if social media is implemented, often it is a stopgap measure and not part of an overall marketing strategy. Social media should be integrated with email campaigns and traditional media, of which 98 percent of hospitals do not do currently.[5] For example, if a hospital is seeking to drive growth in an elective procedure, such as bariatric surgery, it can leverage social media by providing information on this service line. This advances the ability for customers to maintain a relationship with the organization, extending the brand and message. Finally, participating once is not enough; actively updating and maintaining social media websites is essential to attract and retain an audience. A recent survey indicated that 25 percent of hospitals posted only once a month on their Facebook page.[6]

Manage the Message: After a social media presence is established, relevant, unique, and targeted content becomes significant. Hospitals and health plans should understand the end customer, and interact, rather than provide veiled marketing efforts. Actionable, relevant information can complement marketing efforts around events, updates, videos, and photos. The greater the community atmosphere that is created, the more the brand identity prospers.

Perhaps the greatest fear and even misconception regarding social media is the negative forum that will result from online communities. Executives often would rather "opt-out" of social media at the expense of capturing its unique benefits, for fear of the negative backlash that could result. While social media does provide an outlet for complaints, promptly and correctly responding to a customer's concern can quickly turn a negative incident into a positive. The power of social media is the ability to rapidly and effectively connect with a customer to ensure a positive experience; an irritated customer can quickly become an advocate.

Unique to health care, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and FDA requirements provide additional hurdles for health care organizations. Hospital and health plan executives often fear that employees could misuse social media; high profile instances of employees uploading photos to Facebook or posting sensitive patient information have reinforced these views. However, an outright ban of social media by employees is not the best option. Establishing clear, written policies on social media for hospital and health plan employees can provide a more realistic alternative while producing the same results. For example, Henry Ford Health System established a social media policies and procedures document that clearly articulated the health system's stance. [7]

However, health care companies should avoid controlling their brand. The democratization via social media allows anyone to state his or her opinion, including negative ones. While monitoring the message is appropriate, organizations should not view social media as a means of preaching or manipulating the free flow of information. This is particularly relevant for health plans, which are often the least trusted source of health information.[8]

Making Social Media a Competitive Advantage: For hospitals and health plans, social media can be a valuable tool for customer acquisition and retention. Patients identify with the hospital or provider that treated them and often aided or cured an ailment, driving significant awareness and loyalty to the organization. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can serve to keep the channels of communication open after that encounter has occurred.

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[5] *Ibid*

[6] Verasoni. Hospitals and Facebook: A Case Study. February 2011.

[7] Henry Ford Health System. System-Wide Social Media Usage Policy No: 5.29

[8] Deloitte Center for Health Solutions. 2010 Survey of Health Care Consumers.

Health care companies can also target specific demographics through individual campaigns. According to a recent survey, the most likely demographic to connect to health care social media are women aged 35 to 64.[9] This is significant for providers, as this demographic is often the key decision maker on health care issues. Social media allows for targeted, relevant campaigns that can capture such audiences, driving top-line growth.

With social media, many health care organizations seek either a return with minimal to no investment or an outsized return given the level of investment. Other organizations are hesitant to implement social media without more demonstrable ROI data. First, tangible metrics, such as Facebook fans, Twitter followers, website visits, comments, and posts can serve as a means of measuring the engagement and activity of an organization's customers. Further, marketing departments are using health care specific customer relationship management (CRM) tools as a means of targeting and tracking customers. The ability to determine a direct link between social media use and provider referrals, map patient patterns, and provide direct, relevant content, often minutes before the point of purchase, all provide a promising start for the ROI potential of social media.

Additionally, there are clear benefits, including positive word of mouth, brand monitoring, instant communication, and the ability to influence and shape an organization's message that go beyond traditional return on investment. Launching a social media strategy can be a stepping stone to a positive community image, attracting customers to the organization, delivering relevant health information that is increasingly in demand, and maintaining ongoing customer retention.

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[9] YouGov Healthcare. Consumers' Use, Preferences and Expectations of Hospital Social Media. June 2011.