



Social Media in Healthcare: An Addicting Phenomenon

Emily Kneipp, Marketing Coordinator

Who knew five years ago that tweeting could save lives and Facebook posts would boost business? Who expected a social networking site like LinkedIn to be a treasure box to recruiters? The idea that eVisits, electronic consultation between physicians and patients, will be able to replace doctor visits and become a mandatory benefit for physicians has emerged due to the rapid growth of technology. Each year, as the economy continues to expand innovatively and creatively, technology becomes more diverse, more helpful, and more addicting.

The most popular and widely used social media networks are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. There are not many healthcare professionals that do not use a smartphone and have access to those sites at their fingertips. The phenomenon that started out as a way for people to reconnect and stay in touch for personal pleasure has now become a necessity for businesses to utilize their capabilities of providing and obtaining information. Health care organizations should thoughtfully engage with social media."¹ Hospitals should be feigning for the cost effective method of social media. As the opening line of the Mayo Clinic's Center for Social Media² says, the social media revolution is the most far-reaching communications development since Gutenberg's printing press.

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The Addiction Spreads Quickly

The evolution of media is happening faster than ever before. To reach 50 million users, radio took 38 years, television 13 years, and internet 4 years³. Facebook added 100 million users in eight months⁴.

Based on Ed Bennett's Social Networking Hospital List⁵ from November 27, 2010, 890 hospitals use social media. There are:

- 437 YouTube Channels
- 701 Facebook pages
- 662 Twitter Accounts
- 431 LinkedIn Accounts
- 106 Blogs
- 2,337 Hospital Social Networking Sites

Like so many other factors affecting businesses today, social media can either be a boon or a disaster for a company. No industry or business is immune to its touch. It is not a phenomenon to be ignored, rather it is a tool to be managed and evaluated. With a helping of accurate healthcare verbiage, "viral" is a surprisingly accurate description for the process of information dissemination on the internet today. Companies that take a deliberate approach to integrating these social channels into their business models will likely see substantial returns.

Return on investment measured by businesses can be evaluated differently through social media. Although revenue is hoped to be gained in any business initiative, and is indeed profitable in the long term, social media provides return on participation, engagement, involvement, and trust.⁶ A business that accurately and efficiently provides information to readers through social media allows others to see the credibility of the provider, hence gaining interest in what the company, or hospital, is providing to readers or patients. They will subsequently return to the company for information or help.

As patients become more demanding of information, healthcare companies have responded with a supply of convenient, cost-effective methods: tweeting, videos, profiles, and fan pages, the four techniques of the previously mentioned social media sites. Healthcare companies are becoming better poised to react to the rapidly changing landscape of social media.

The Federal Drug Agency (FDA) has even considered using social media to regulate digital pharmaceutical marketing. As of December 22, 2010, the FDA decided to put a hold on its much anticipated regulatory guidance for digital pharmaceutical marketing until the first quarter of 2011. Though a procedure has not been defined, "Guidance on the Internet and Social Media" was listed for upcoming marketing plans.⁷

Taking the First Draw

With so many stakeholders using social networking sites, there is an expectation of interaction beyond informational postings on a company website. A more proactive approach is to create forums for discussion and respond directly to user postings. A study conducted by Wetpaint/Altimeter Group found that engagement with customers on social media sites could in fact be measured. "These 'Social Media Mavens'" on

The most successful companies actively use social media channels to communicate with customers and employees.

average grew company revenues by 18 percent over the last 12 months, while the least engaged companies saw revenues sink 6 percent on average over the same time period" the report stated.⁸ Beyond that, they discovered a positive correlation between depth and breadth of engagement and financial performance. The most successful companies were those that not only participated in numerous social channels, but actively

used those channels to communicate with customers and employees. These companies also had teams dedicated to managing social content.

A perfect example of using social media to communicate with customers and employees is how Bon Secours in Richmond, Virginia (@BonSecoursRVA on Twitter) began using social media. Nick Dawson, Administrative Director of Physician and Community Engagement, says their Facebook page started unintentionally as a place for employees. "Everything was a question or had a question in it," he said. Fans, 75 percent of which were employees, would respond to the questions posted on the Facebook page by someone on the Bon Secours Richmond team and when a fan would respond, Bon Secours would send them logo wear, like a t-shirt or paper weight. They felt acknowledging the comment and thanking the fan for responding would apply positive reinforcement to keep them engaged, similar to Pavlovian conditioning. They needed a way to keep people engaged on the websites, especially with only Nick and one other maintaining Bon Secours Richmond's social media pages.

The most obvious and impactful effect of social media is sharing information and knowledge. As soon as any social media site is launched, the user is faced with a breadth of information. Sites like [WedMD](#) can be considered a beginning site for sharing information, which expanded into a networking social site that allows users to pose questions to physicians live on the internet or direct a question to a hospital's Twitter by preceding the question with the "@" name, or posting something on the Facebook wall of a hospital.

Video and photo sharing on sites such as YouTube is a great way for healthcare organizations to share interactive information to physicians. Eighty-three percent of

physicians report watching video streaming.⁹ “Photo and video sharing can be particularly useful for documenting rare and unusual medical conditions for teaching or reference purposes,” said Christinia Beach Thielst in her book, *Social Media and Healthcare: Connect, Communicate, Collaborate*.

YouTube benefits patients to evaluate and learn about their own symptoms or disease. YouTube provides more description than pictures, and videos of what patients are to expect of a forming illness, or surgery for example, as shown by others. Ted Eytan, family physician, wrote a blog entitled "Fight multiple sclerosis using YouTube and other social media tools" in which a patient reported on YouTube his recovery from a new treatment and wanted different physicians' approach to it.¹⁰

A lot of Engagement for a Very Little Price

Perhaps the most obvious benefit of using social media is the ability to easily access a large audience at very little cost. It is an alternative way to generate more contact with current and potential customers. Companies can use their social sites to gather data directly from the user, further supporting and refining marketing efforts. Using these outlets, organizations can gain more control over the development of their brand and how it is perceived, as well as encourage brand recognition. Not only can organizations collect discreet data, they can capture the human element by listening to what is being said about their products and services.

Neal Gorman, VP of Public Relations at Lutheran Medical Center (@LutheranHC) in Brooklyn, NY, recommends having a good solid PR department in place doing traditional PR marketing before they engage in social media. “We know all too well the public venue is important and you never know what you'll get,” he references the free text of social media. The proper team has to know how to handle situations that pose as touchy, he said.

With such an extensive user network, firms can employ viral marketing, whereby a campaign spreads exponentially in a small amount of time, reaching users in numbers that could never be realized by traditional means. Organizations can hold dialogues with customers to investigate new ideas. These exchanges also offer another means to improve customer service. Internally, social media can serve as a communication standard to more effectively keep employees connected and up-to-date on company operations.

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- Neal Gorman, VP of Public Relations, Lutheran Healthcare

“You have to fish where the fish are,” Gorman says. “Social media is more to add to the tool box; it’s not the only method.” He compares using social media in healthcare today as similar to how hospitals are familiar with electronic medical records. “They know they need to have it; they just need to know how to make it happen.”

Instant Effects - Emergency Communication

Enabling your social media account from your fingertips becomes addicting, but being able to share information instantly is a huge benefit when it comes to spreading emergency safety alerts. Christina Thielst, freelance healthcare administrator, blogged about the best practice of social media – emergency communication.

“Think of social media technologies as another layer to your healthcare organization's redundant communications plan and consider that tweets may be the best way to reach your employees when the cell towers are overloaded and/or they are on the move,” Thielst blogged.

An example of this instant alert is Innovis Health in 2009. The hospital was having trouble reaching the staff and community about rising flood waters through email, fax, or phone so they sent out a tweet that was received instantly to their audience.¹¹

Taking a deeper stab into the simplicity of reaching a large audience, an operating room in Wisconsin decided to share a live knee surgery. An April 2009 tweet by Aurora Healthcare (@Aurora_Health) was the first health system in Wisconsin to document a live knee surgery. “It's a new way to reach a different population,” said Peter Balistrieri, the hospital spokesman who came up with the idea.¹²

Withdrawal Symptoms - Negative Effects

While these social sites offer a new means to connect with current and potential stakeholders without oversight, many benefits can just as easily become risks. As mentioned previously, viral marketing can get information to huge numbers of users very rapidly. However, the same process can just as effectively spread damaging or false information. In instances like these, it is imperative that firms act quickly and definitively. It becomes obvious that the fastest and most effective responses are communicated through the same social vehicles that spread the original message.

Another issue companies may face is the accidental, or intentional, leaking of proprietary information by employees who participate in social networks either on their own time or at work. It is also very easy for anyone to create fake sites claiming to be the genuine company and spread damaging information.

DIVURGENT's social media sites are currently maintained by one person, but information is frequently provided from team members that are spread at hospital sites regionally. DIVURGENT's corporate social media policy reminds team members to share information and ground-breaking news, even events involving our clients, and provides them insight into how not to use social media. A management consulting company, DIVURGENT staff, whether training, supporting, or building IT software, knows that privacy and confidentiality is essential.

Healthcare organizations are further impacted by HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), which protects patients' privacy rights. Any information that is publicly broadcasted cannot contain identifying characteristics about a patient or their personal health information without their expressed consent. However, patients can and do share identifying information on peer generated sites like PatientsLikeMe.com.

Nick Dawson, with Bon Secours in Richmond, Virginia, addresses privacy on Bon Secours' behalf to acknowledge social media comments that are directed toward a patient's specific treatment, but to ask them to contact the administrator personally to discuss it offline.

A problem for smaller companies especially is gathering news from employees to push out information to the public or share it with team members. Dawson says in 2011 Bon Secours is addressing the needs to resources and how to allocate the material to all employees (nurses, physicians, even housekeeping). An employee will be tagged as a social media ambassador for a particular day and it is their responsibility to log into Bon Secours' Facebook and Twitter accounts to share what is going on.

"We're not short on innovation, not short on common theme, but short on contribution," Dawson said. With various employees having control of the credentials, it allows other people to carry the responsibility because as anyone who manages social media can agree, it is very time consuming.

Dependency on the Future

Social media is one addiction that will not be intervened. Hospital systems have added social media to their to-do list for 2011, and for Dana Lewis, a new job. She was hired by Seattle's Swedish Medical Center as social media manager.¹³

Based on the success of Lutheran Medical Center's 2010 tweets and posts, Gorman says there will be a lot more engaging in 2011. The Lutheran team, which as of now is just him and one other person, will make sure the tweets and posts are a certain percentage of their news updates. They will have increasing targets for 2011, Gorman said.

While it is not an old method, social media has become so widely used that it will need more creative approaches to withstand interest from users. Dawson says the upper classmen, like the Mayo Clinic and Bon Secours, provide great case studies and they provide the standard for the underclassmen. In short time, just having a Facebook page or Twitter profile will not be enough. As mentioned in the introduction, if eVisits become a mandatory benefits for physicians, it will force both parties to be engaged, Dawson said.

LinkedIn provides great resources for recruiting. Bon Secours is having their corporate team look into the budget for expanding LinkedIn opportunities. LinkedIn has three account types aside from the complimentary basic account: business, business plus, and executive. Each monthly payment ensures additional capabilities on the account. DIVURGENT's ([linkedin.com/companies/DIVURGENT](https://www.linkedin.com/companies/DIVURGENT)) recruiters use LinkedIn as well.

The team at Lutheran is currently conducting a NY Healthcare Analysis on social media. They are creating a database of hospitals in the state of NY that are using social media links and you tube accounts. Gorman said he is 99% positive that Lutheran Medical Center is the only NY hospital using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube effectively and successfully. He has noticed that some hospitals have a lot of followers on Twitter and not a lot of fans on Facebook, or vice versa, but the point of having social media networks is to “develop community building,” Gorman said. He said the importance of having a high number of fans and followers is not the entire number of people, but the small fraction that is willing to respond or help.

The future of social media will not be its demise, but an era of constantly innovative techniques that provide “beneficial, collaborative, and conversational”¹⁴ abilities to the healthcare industry. “2011 is a year where we really see things happening,” Dawson said.

About the Author

Emily Kneipp is DIVURGENT's marketing coordinator and has a B.A. from Old Dominion University. She maintains DIVURGENT's social media pages and is responsible for email marketing, collateral design, and proposal development.

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