4 ways social media can improve your medical practice

Going online doesn’t have to be only about chatting with colleagues and patients. Experts give insights into techniques to tap into the power of social media.


Although patients may appreciate social media for the active dialogue with physicians and access to trusted educational material, social media can provide value to physicians and their practices in ways doctors may not have considered.

Two reports from large consulting organizations released in 2012 looked at ways in which social media can accomplish business objectives beyond basic marketing. The reports, one from the PwC Health Research Institute, the other from CSC’s Global Institute for Emerging Healthcare Practices, looked at social media as a valuable business intelligence tool, a customer service tool, and even an avenue for reporting that could lead to better care and improved outcomes.

“Increasingly, I think the progressive physicians are more focused on the customer experience and how they can differentiate themselves from other physicians, not just from a clinical perspective but from the overall engagement perspective,” said Karla Anderson, partner in PwC’s Health Industries practice. Social media “does give them a sort of easy way, with not a lot of effort, to find ... what their customers care about.”

And it doesn't have to involve constant monitoring or hiring a social media team. It may involve finding communities of people that the physician or practice can watch and learn from. “You can listen and learn and use that to further enhance your practice,” Anderson said.

How can doctors use social media in new ways? Experts point to four categories of opportunity:

Discover needed services

Through social media, physicians can gain insight into what patients are willing to do to improve their health and what obstacles stand in their way, Kevin Abramson said in the PwC report. He is director of marketing planning for OptumHealth, a health management solutions company that is a subsidiary of UnitedHealth Group.

Chris Keating, a physical therapist who manages social media activities for Strive Physical Therapy and Sports Rehabilitation in New Jersey, said Strive's social media activities give him an outlet to find out what services and events interest people. When he posts photos of an event Strive held in the community, he'll ask Facebook followers what events, such as screenings for certain medical conditions, they would like to see. It's a way to get the information you want in a conversational way, he said.

Jessica Logan, social media and online content specialist for the University of California, San Diego Health Sciences marketing and communications department, said she sees a lot of trends developing on Twitter that could indicate a need in the community. For example, she said she has seen a lot of discussion on ulcerative colitis. From a social media content perspective, she knows the community could benefit from her posting more information about that topic. From a business perspective, the conversations could help guide product or service development efforts.

Although a small physician practice might not have the manpower to manage social media efforts, they are at an advantage when it comes to acting on information due to the smaller number of people making decisions. While it would be difficult for a large institution like UC San Diego to institute a program or specialized service immediately, a small practice has that flexibility.
Jason Hwang, MD, an internist and executive director of health care at the Innosight Institute, a San Francisco-based research organization focusing on education and health care, said social media could provide a new way of tracking population health. Tracking health trends is becoming increasingly popular, as many practices move toward medical home and shared savings models. It also could identify “hot spots” for disease outbreaks.

“A hospital or health system could engage social media to see what their patients are talking about and subsequently target those hot spots with certain therapies or interventions,” he said.

**Improve customer service**

How a physician practice or hospital responds to negative comments and complaints can carry equal or more weight than positive consumer engagement, according to the PwC report. Unlike customer service issues brought to a practice’s attention in a survey, complaints made on social media can be addressed — and often remedied — immediately, because there is an outlet for a dialogue.

Even though specific details should be kept offline, practices can respond in public with an apology and offer to correct the situation so that others can see action being taken. Logan said when other social media users see that a problem is being handled right away, they come to realize that customer service is taken seriously. It also gives the practice a chance to know about situations immediately so they are remedied and not exacerbated by an upset patient.

**Gather feedback on medications**

Jared Rhoads, senior research analyst with CSC’s Global Institute for Emerging Healthcare Practices, said feedback on therapies is one of the most valuable uses for social media — and possibly one of the easiest to facilitate.

“If 10,000 people start talking about a side effect of a drug, it won't be that hard to find that out,” he said.

Monitoring Twitter buzz surrounding a certain drug, for example, would offer great insight into how patients are reacting to it. Not only is information on side effects useful, but information on therapies that are working well is valuable to physicians, he said. There may be insight about a therapy the physician hasn’t tried, or an alternative therapy he learns about through patient interactions on social media.

Patient communities are a great source of information for physicians. HealthUnlocked in the United Kingdom, for example, has more than 100 disease-specific communities where patients share experiences and advice. With the users’ consent, the data are collected from their discussions and shared with physicians, researchers and pharmaceutical companies. (See correction)

In the United States, companies such as Reading, Mass.-based InfoMedics use online communities to collect discrete data about topics patients might not always share with their physicians. They enter the online communities, and through questionnaires or surveys, ask questions that can be answered by patients in a quantifiable way.

Gene Guselli, CEO of InfoMedics, said patients are often more comfortable talking about their health with a third party, even if they know their physicians is listening.

**Compare and improve quality**

Linda Pophal, a health care marketing and social and media consultant, said social media makes it easy for practices to see how they compare with others in the region in terms of what they offer and how satisfied their patients are. Observing the competition’s social media sites will give practices a glimpse inside their walls.

Monitoring the social media activities of others also can give practices that are just dipping their toes into the online waters ideas on how best to facilitate those activities.

UC San Diego’s Logan said practices not only can see how they compare with others by monitoring the activities of competitors, they also can learn from others’ mistakes. One lesson she learned early on is that organizations that were not responsive to patient criticisms and comments through social media paid the price. Her organization decided not to make the same mistake, so responding to online feedback quickly became a priority.
Patient privacy is always a concern when it comes to social media and the prospect of patients sharing health-related information in public. The PwC survey found that a third of consumers would be willing to have their conversations monitored if it meant improved care coordination or clinical quality. The survey didn't specify for respondents who might monitor the conversations, but 61% said they trust information posted by physicians, and 41% would be willing to share information with them.

Gaining business intelligence through social media is a market not yet tapped, but one that presents great opportunities, Rhoads said.

## How physicians view patients on social media

Attitudes toward use of social media vary among medical students, resident physicians and practicing physicians, according to a study. Practicing physicians, for example, are more likely to visit the profile page of a patient or a patient's relatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use or opinion</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Residents</th>
<th>Practicing physicians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has visited patient's or family member's profile</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is aware of patient or family member visiting your site</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
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<td>Has received “friend” requests from patients or family members</td>
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<td>7.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has requested to be “friends” with patient or family member</td>
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<td>1.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinks it's OK for physicians to interact with patients on social media as part of patient care</td>
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<td>22.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinks social networking sites have potential for improving doctor-patient communication</td>
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<td>29.8%</td>
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<td>Thinks communication on social media can be accomplished without compromising patient confidentiality</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: "The Patient-Doctor Relationship and Online Social Networks: Results of a National Survey," *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, October 2011 (link)

## FSMB releases model social media policies

Social media has become too big to ignore, says the Federation of State Medical Boards, which is why it says medical organizations need to have policies in place to protect physicians.

The FSMB released guidelines in May meant to help state medical boards provide training to their licensees on proper social media use. The guidelines, similar to those adopted by the American Medical Association in 2010, promote professionalism by physicians when using social media.

The FSMB guidelines encourage physicians to do all they can to protect patient privacy and confidentiality when interacting with patients online, in a public forum. They also say physicians should be forthcoming about their credentials and employment but avoid requests for medical advice.

The document says medical boards have the authority to discipline physicians for unprofessional behavior related to the inappropriate use of social media. Disciplinary actions can range from a letter of reprimand to the revocation of a license.
Though social media presents the opportunity for unintended consequences, it holds enormous potential to disseminate information and forge meaningful relationships, the FSMB document says.

**EXTERNAL LINKS**


**CORRECTION**

This story originally misstated the number of disease-specific online communities operated by HealthUnlocked in the United Kingdom. HealthUnlocked has more than 100 of them. *American Medical News* regrets the error.