

Social Media for Marketing Health Care Services? You Betcha!

Marketing via social media is ethical, valuable, and essential if physicians are to grow their credibility, leadership, and ability to attract patients.

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Even with an increase in privacy laws and regulations surrounding patients' care and protection, the ability of health care providers to communicate their services, techniques, and initiatives via the Web continues to flourish. Social media have provided a way for medical practices to weed through an overwhelming amount of digital information and find/share the important pieces with each other and patients. Dedicated medical social media sites such as Sermo, Doximity, MedicalMingle, Healtheva, and Ozmosis allow the exchange of information and opinions among medical experts. Combine them with consumer sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, and YouTube, and it is easy to share information with patients, employees, and other groups. The bottom line is that marketing using social media is ethical, valuable, and essential to physicians' enhancing their credibility, leadership, and ability to attract patients.

IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Marketing a medical practice using social media is all about people's helping people, which has huge implications for the medical field. Social media allow practices to serve as trusted resources for users—not just patients. By posting breaking news or tips and information, inviting employees and patients to national and local events, and sharing exciting or informative photographs and videos, practices have the ability to serve and connect more directly with employees, patients, and influencers on the medical world.

Social media let practices instantly interact with patients. While of course ensuring that appropriate legal boundaries are intact, a practice should establish and maintain a Facebook page and Twitter account. These media serve as direct lines of communication between doctors and patients. Patients and their family members can ask questions (often ones that other fans or follow-

ers may also need answered), share their experiences, or find quick updates posted from the practice's blog to reduce their time spent searching online. Social media represent a true resource for medical patients, not only in terms of expert information, but also through peer reviews and experiential information that individuals find much more real.

If the surgeon is too busy to keep up with all the social media sites, he or she can assign the job to authorized social media monitors. By developing a highly detailed and personalized social media policy, the practice can allow multiple employees to access social media channels to help in their monitoring and post updates. Physicians may wish to consider hiring a third-party social media consultant or a firm trained to understand the medical field to manage multiple profiles that may be on Facebook, Twitter, or Google+.

HOW TO TELL IF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IS WORKING

Although success cannot be measured solely by numbers, it is important to take into consideration metrics such as feedback ratios, new "likes," followers, video and photograph views, and so on. The focus of the strategy, however, should be on retaining quality fans and followers by meeting their needs for engagement and information.

Because many of the industry-niche social media sites are known to only a few users, practices can use their Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn groups to share valuable information with others. Tweeting, posting, and updating the practice's social media marketing efforts steadily educate followers—including other surgeons—on techniques for managing various medical situations. Patients that are educated about different conditions on the practice's sites, will be better informed before coming into the office, saving valuable chair time. Similarly, social media allow a constant connection with potential

SOCIAL MEDIA DOs AND DON'Ts FOR HEALTH CARE

- DO address all feedback (positive and negative) honestly and professionally.
- DON'T discuss patients' private information at any time or across any medium.
- DO create a strong internal social media policy and train/educate employees to abide by it.
- DON'T hamper any social media efforts being made at the office. You can block Facebook on the computers all day long, but employees have smartphones now and will post comments as they wish regardless. Plus, they can be your greatest brand ambassadors.
- DO incorporate contests, giveaways, open-ended questions, and opinion-based posts to encourage interaction among your users.
- DON'T overpost and inundate your users with information. They will eventually block your posts/tweets or unsubscribe/unfollow you.

employees and thereby increase the speed with which practices may conduct hiring.

Savvy and fast-moving medical practices have developed phone applications that help individuals identify, for example, symptoms of illness or potential drug interactions, all while directly linking their names with consumers. Above all, the exchange of information leads to a more highly recognized medical practice and a healthier, better-educated population. ■

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