

A rising tide: Hospitals and social media

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Social media

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Abstract

The advent of social media has changed the face of healthcare communications. More and more hospitals are recognizing this fact and seeking to integrate tools like Twitter® and Facebook® into their own communications strategies. This article gives an overview of the challenges clinics are facing vis-à-vis social media, and of the benefits they reap when the new tools are used effectively. Trends in social media use by hospitals in North America and Europe are highlighted and a range of best practice examples given. These include brand and crisis management, patient and physician education, fundraising, community building, and recruitment. Finally, the shifting role of medical writers and communicators toward social media management is explained.

Keywords: Hospitals, Social media, Healthcare, Medical communications, Medical writing, Patient experience

Many players in the field of healthcare have been integrating social media channels such as Twitter®, Facebook®, and YouTube™ and Co. into their communications strategies.¹ Although most hospitals have not been 'early adopters' of these new tools, the last 2–3 years have seen a significant increase in the number of clinics using social media.² Although a hospital whose 'bottom line' should continue to be restoring health to patients is not the same thing as a profit-oriented corporation, many of the problems and chances hospitals are confronted with when using social media are similar to those that companies face. However, some clinics are rising to the challenge and there are already a range of best practice examples where hospitals are using social media to their advantage.

Challenges and chances of social media for hospitals

Many of the restraints holding hospitals back from using social media are the same as those in other

institutions: ignorance of the new tools, insecurity about how to use them, and organizational barriers, insufficient resources and/or a lack of strategy and guidelines on social media use. When the first three issues have been addressed and a clinic decides to enter the world of social media, the latter issues quickly come to the fore.

Social media should be integrated into the overarching communications strategy of a hospital and focused towards achieving clearly defined goals. In addition, its unique potential for interacting with audiences needs to be recognized and implemented accordingly. Some hospitals – as indeed some companies – have not yet fully grasped the Web 2.0 paradigm shift and are continuing to just 'push' information at audiences, instead of trying to engage in a conversation with them.³ Having a conversation with the many people who are likely to engage with a hospital's social media presence is a great deal of work. The Mayo Clinic in the USA, arguably one of the leaders of the pack when it comes to social media use by a hospital, started out with limited personnel but now employs a full-time staff of nine to monitor and feed the hospital's social media channels.⁴

The conjunction of social media and healthcare automatically opens up ethical questions on what is allowed in a hospital setting. Hospitals need to address these and work out a binding social media policy for all players within the organization to avoid embarrassing gaffes or full-blown crises. A case in point is the so-called 'Placenta Incident', where nursing students faced disciplinary measures after posting a picture of a placenta on Facebook® after a training session.⁵ Social media trailblazers like the University of Maryland Medical Center and the Mayo Clinic have been exemplary in implementing such guidelines and making them openly accessible.^{6,7}

On the face of it, social media might seem to some hospital administrators to be a huge drain on resources without any return. However, as best

practice examples show, when used strategically social media does reap significant benefits. Hospitals are getting back at least as much as they are giving, be it money through fundraising schemes, qualified personnel through recruitment efforts, or unfiltered information by listening to what people are saying about them. As never before, social media offer clinics the chance to improve their policies and processes based on patient and/or community feedback. Given that there is always room for improvement when it comes to the patient experience,⁸ social media can be an invaluable sounding board for what their 'customers' really think. That being said, a positive social media experience can allow hospitals to build and strengthen their own patient communities.

North American hospitals leading the way

So which hospitals are already employing social media? In general, clinics in North America seem to be further along than their European counterparts when it comes to using the new channels of communication. Approximately one in five American hospitals (21%) uses Facebook®, Twitter®, and/or YouTube™⁹ – a figure which is similar in Canada.¹⁰ This level of usage is yet to be reached by European clinics: Of Germany's approximately 2000 hospitals,¹¹ almost 200 were present on Facebook® in 2011,¹² i.e. about 10%. Data from 2010 suggest that hospitals in some Scandinavian



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countries (e.g. Sweden and Norway) are very active on LinkedIn, but significantly less so on social media channels like Facebook®.^{13,14} LinkedIn usage is also high in the Netherlands (<50%) and in UK hospitals (<40%).¹⁵ A 2010 study found that 40% of British NHS Primary Care Trusts use at least one social media channel.¹⁶

Whether or not a hospital is able or willing to engage in social media depends on a range of factors. A 2011 study showed that US hospitals that were large, urban or part of a health system were statistically more likely to use social media; they were also more likely to treat children or be involved with graduate medical education.⁹ What is encouraging is the creative way in which some clinics are experimenting with social media, be it to strengthen their brand, educate patients and doctors, engage in fundraising, recruit qualified personnel, or manage critical situations. Hospitals that have quickly embraced the new technologies can be expected to have a significant edge over their non-networking competitors in the approaching years.

Expanding a brand

The Mayo Clinic in the USA was one of the world's first hospitals to start using social media. It favored a learning-by-doing approach, dovetailing existing resources with the new tools, and growing its social media platform incrementally. The hospital has by now successfully expanded its brand into the social media world and currently has more than 60 000 Facebook® fans, 260 000 Twitter® followers, and its own YouTube™ channel. Mayo's media strategists saw social media as an extension of the 'word-of-mouth' principle that has always contributed to the hospital's success. Hence, the clinic stays tightly focused on its core strategy – helping people with issues concerning their health and well-being – and trusting that satisfied patients and family members will also act as multipliers on the new channels.⁴ The hospital has created its own online community that allows people to access health-related information and connect with one another on specific topics.¹⁷

Informing patients

Hospitals are using diverse social media platforms to inform and educate their patients and/or the general public. Some are using videocasts, whether integrated into their own websites or promoted via proprietary YouTube™ channels, as a particularly effective medium for explaining complex medical procedures. The University Hospitals Birmingham in the UK have done this particularly well: They produced an

animated videocast explaining radiotherapy treatment to children in collaboration with Aardman animation (the makers of the ‘Wallace and Gromit’ films).¹⁸ Videocasts are also a means of humanizing hospitals by giving visual access to the people ‘behind the scenes’ and by storytelling. Clinics use their YouTube™ channels to show interviews with specialists on specific conditions¹⁹ or feature patients explaining how they experience and cope with illness.²⁰

Blogs are also an excellent means of keeping patients up to date on medical issues. The Wellington Hospital in the UK curates an extensive blog that can be searched for everything from ‘Breast Care’ to ‘Urology’.²¹ The Klinkum Essen-Mitte in Germany used its patient magazine as the starting point for a multimedia information campaign that integrates print, video, and social media. Parts of the print magazine have been converted into videocasts²² and the different platforms promote each other. The print magazine points readers toward online offerings, and vice versa, users can order the magazine via Facebook®.²³

Raising funds

San Francisco Medical Center in the USA significantly stepped up fundraising results by employing social media. Its ‘Challenge for the Children’ competition initially wanted to raise funds for a new children’s hospital by pitting individual teams against each other. One of the teams used the popular internet gaming platform Farmville to generate more than \$800 000 in donations from 162 544 donors – an amount that far exceeded the hospital’s projected goal of \$100 000. Players were able to buy seeds for peppermint sticks and then received a teddy bear for their virtual Farmville farm, with all of the proceeds from the candy going to the donation fund.²⁴ St. Jude’s Research Hospital in the USA has almost half a million Facebook® fans and almost 100 000 Twitter® followers. The hospital consistently uses its social media platforms to raise funds for ongoing research into childhood cancer.²⁵

Building healthy communities

The South Coast Health System, a non-profit health delivery system encompassing three regional hospitals in the USA does not have a flashy social media presence, but is much geared toward the needs of its specific community. As a result it has developed an iPhone app called MyHealth to help patients and caregivers manage their healthcare environment (prescriptions, appointments, etc.).²⁶ Other hospitals are discovering how to use Twitter®, which is

a powerful tool for connecting with patients and which some experts say is still not being used to its full potential in healthcare settings.²⁷ That being said, the NHS Nottingham City in the UK uses Twitter® to alert patients to the need for getting a flu jab and offers web resources to direct patients to their nearest hospital or healthcare provider.²⁸ Birmingham’s Heartlands Hospital in the UK hosted a two week Twitter®-o-thon to educate patients on diabetes and obesity.²⁹ And a Twitter® session by a Mayo Clinic specialist led to a patient seeking help from the hospital on a condition she had been told was untreatable.³⁰

Managing crises

The South Coast Health System (SCHS) in the USA also used Twitter® during an environmental crisis to keep people updated on an ongoing basis. After a large chemical spill, numerous people were taken to local hospitals for treatment. The SCHS kept up a continuous live stream of information on patient admittances and releases, treatment progression, and on what the media was reporting about the accident.³¹ Hospitals might do well to explore further uses for Twitter® in an emergency care setting, i.e. in triage situations or in the management of emergency response teams. Texas Health Resources, a 13-hospital system, used Yammer (a kind of internal Twitter® for companies) when one of the system’s hospital emergency departments was overcrowded with flu patients. The Chief Nursing Officer sent a message on Yammer about the problem, whereupon another hospital offered to share its resources to help meet the emergency.³²

Educating doctors

Social media can be used not just to inform and educate patients, but healthcare professionals too. Johns Hopkins Medicine is using Twitter® to tweet live during seminars, upping its re-tweet rate, and own popularity among followers.³³ The University of Buffalo is encouraging its surgeons to tweet during surgery, hoping to accelerate and enhance the flow of information for medical training purposes.³⁴ Several US hospitals have employed Twitter® during live surgery, not just to educate doctors, but also to inform patients and the general public about specialized procedures.³⁵

Recruiting talent

After having trouble recruiting gastroenterologists via medical journals and direct mail, Geisinger Health System in the USA decided to shift their

focus to social media channels. They launched a Facebook® page with pictures, information on recruiting events and links to their own website which proved to be substantially more successful in attracting candidates and filling vacant positions than the conventional channels had been.³⁶ Many hospitals like the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia are using videocasts to describe what their medical employees do on a daily basis and to attract people who may be looking into a career such as nursing.^{37,38}

Role of medical writers and communicators

With the proliferation of communications platforms and the speed of change driving the communications process, the role of medical writers and/or communicators active in a clinic environment is subtly shifting and broadening. Writers will not just have to stay abreast of current developments online, they will need to expand their qualifications to include formats like pod- and videocasts, whose effective use still hinges on the conceptualization skills necessary for good writing, but whose storytelling approach is different. In addition to communicating with external target groups directly, writers will need to extend their role within the organization, i.e. by identifying and recruiting individuals willing and able to engage with the new tools, by teaching staff how to use social media platforms, and by encouraging them to find their own writing 'voice'. In effect, writers and/or communicators are becoming what is termed as 'social media managers' or 'community managers' – flexible enablers capable of getting messages across by intelligently fusing old and new communications tools.

Conclusion

After a slow start, hospitals in the Western world are increasingly using social media channels to connect with different audiences. Clinics in North America have a head start over their European counterparts as to the frequency of usage, but there are best practice examples on both sides of the Atlantic that show how social media can be used to benefit the players involved. Social media not only offers hospitals the chance of connecting directly with their communities and receiving valuable feedback on their services, but can be used for a range of other activities like brand and crisis management, patient and physician education, fundraising, and recruitment. The role of medical writers and communicators within this environment is evolving into that of a social media manager responsible for integrating old and new tools and using them strategically to the best effect.

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Media coverage of cancer

Beyond the oncology clinical study reports and the medical manuscripts that we medical writers prepare is a body of literature on cancer that targets the lay audience. And these may actually paint a completely different picture of the disease than what we see in tables, figures, and listings.

Two studies investigated how the media cover cancer research in two countries. In one study, American researchers conducted a content analysis of cancer news reporting by US newspapers ($n = 8$) and magazines ($n = 5$) between 2005 and 2007. Their results showed that of the 436 randomly sampled articles analysed, 32.1% focused on survivorship and only 7.6% on mortality. The majority of the articles covered aggressive cancer treatments (57.1%), but only 13.1% reported that these treatments can fail. The topic of end-of-life palliative care for cancer patients is very rarely discussed (2 of the 436 articles). The authors criticized the American media for misleading the public by giving an ‘inappropriately optimistic view of cancer treatment, outcomes, and prognosis’.¹

Another study analysed stories by the world’s largest broadcasting organization, the UK-based BBC, on cancer research from July 1998 to June 2006. Innovations in cancer treatment are a favourite topic (20%) followed by lifestyle choices (12%), genetics (9%) and nutrition (e.g. food and beverage; 8%). Most of the stories cited as sources articles published in peer-reviewed journals but with a bias towards UK (40%) and US (36%) research papers. In fact, the British papers were overcited by a factor of about 6 relative to research papers from the rest of the world. The sources were dominated by *The Lancet*, *British Journal of Cancer*, and *British Medical Journal*,

journals with high impact factors. The authors concluded that ‘media reporting of cancer research by the BBC is, relative to global cancer research activity and outputs (publications), narrow’.

Both studies reported breast cancer as the cancer type most covered by the media (>30% of all the BBC stories), which was actually over-reported relative to its cancer disease burden of 13%.² Preference for the ‘pink’ cancer may be due to its high survival rate which gives lots of happy-ending material. However, survivorship of young, beautiful celebrities (e.g. Kylie Minogue, Christina Applegate) also ‘glams’ the malignancy and keeps the paparazzi busy.

Statistics estimate that one in two men and one in three women will have cancer during their lifetime.¹ Everybody knows at least one person diagnosed with cancer. Sad as it may sound, cancer is so widespread it has almost become a household word. All the more reason why a balanced and less hyped media reporting on cancer is needed.

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