Digital Communication

Editorial

Whether you're a social media newbie or a seasoned pro, navigating the ever-changing landscape of digital platforms can be challenging. Add to that a constant flow of new technologies, shifting user behaviours, and impacting global events, and it all becomes a bit too overwhelming to manage.

Social media is a powerful asset in our communicator's toolkits, enabling us to disseminate vital information, connect with audiences, and foster community engagement. As communicators in the health and medical fields, it's crucial that we stay ahead of new developments that may affect our effective use of digital platforms. In this vast ocean of information, we must be proactive in seeking out best practices. But where to start?

Shannen Young is a social media strategy and digital communications expert – among her other impressive skills. In the article below, she doesn't just offer advice; she provides a roadmap to navigate the complexities of social media with ease. From foundational best practices to the latest and future developments in the digital realm, she delves into how these changes are

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reshaping our approach to communication.

I'm confident that her insights will equip you with the knowledge and strategies needed to thrive in this dynamic environment, ensuring we not only keep pace but lead the way in digital health communication.

Happy reading!

Nicole

Traversing the social media landscape:
Digital health communications in 2024

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Abstract

Amidst a post-pandemic landscape marked by dis- and misinformation, new technologies, and platform shifts, health communications will need to be rightly balanced between convenience, quality, and trust to cut through the digital noise online. Navigating the dynamic social media terrain will require adherence to regulatory standards, while the adoption of new trends like artificial intelligence offers new approaches for content creation and audience insights. Medical communicators will need to harness the power of new technologies, employ content strategies tailored to audiences and platforms, and continue to measure social media metrics to stay ahead of the times and deliver effective and impactful campaigns.

In the minute it takes you to read the opening paragraph of this article, roughly four million posts are liked on Facebook, 694,000 reels are sent via Instagram DMs, and 360,000 tweets are shared to X (formerly known as Twitter).[1] From the early days of social networking websites like Myspace to instant messaging services like AOL, blogging, and Facebook, social media has grown to boast over five billion active users and permeate our daily lives as our primary source of social interaction, entertainment, and news.[2] With the average internet user spending two and a half hours daily on various platforms,[2] the social media landscape has become prime real estate for communicators, marketers, and technologists alike. In a dynamic and ever-evolving environment, social media is attuned to consumer behaviours and rapid technological developments that are reflected in audiences' desires for entertainment and to be entertained. Whether that be through authentic, personalised content, informative campaigns, or harnessing the power of artificial intelligence (AI), medical communicators need to adapt or risk falling by the wayside.

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Navigating rocky terrain
A post-pandemic world

The exponential growth of social media and interconnectivity of the netizens of the world was a breeding ground for mis- and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting infodemic.[3] Although the presence of mis- and disinformation online is not new and often a key component of destabilising campaigns by nefarious actors,[4] we witnessed a fundamental shift away from trusting institutions and scientific experts and the information they communicate during the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] Despite a plethora of actors sharing inaccurate information and stoking an environment of scepticism "in the comments," health communicators have a unique opportunity to provide more accessible and targeted information online, improving the health literacy of audiences worldwide.

In addition to an, at times, belligerent environment online, the rise of new platforms and rebranding of old-timers pose new challenges for medical communicators and the organisations they represent. The upsurge of the video-focused TikTok and rebranding of Twitter to X sent ripples through the sea of social media apps, prompting the release of several competitors, including Bluesky,[6] Mastodon,[7] and Threads[8] – Meta's rival to X – and a noticeable

shift to short-form video content on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube in the form of stories and shorts, respectively.[8] Influencers within the fields of science communication and medical communications are gaining traction on Instagram and TikTok, and to a lesser extent, YouTube, as the lay population becomes increasingly exposed to their content online through organic searches and algorithmic suggestions. LinkedIn continues to grow in popularity as the go-to platform for professionals, while user uptick on the X replacement platforms remains slow, a possible signal of user fatigue.

AI enters the chat

Since the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT in late 2022,[9] generative AI has made waves across industries with social media being no exception. There is no shortage of third-party applications to generate social copy, edit, or proofread, and create graphic materials. While generative AI and AI assistants are tools most medical communicators should have in their arsenal, it is important to keep the human component of communication at heart. Finding the right balance between convenience, quality, and trust is paramount.

Medical communicators can incorporate AI into their social media processes to assist with brainstorming content ideas, writing social copy based on prompts or existing posts, and suggesting appropriate images or videos to accompany posts.[10] Major players in the social media and content creation field have incorporated AI assistants directly into their software, such as Adobe's Firefly,[11] Hootsuite's OwlyWriter AI,[12] and Canva's Magic Design.[13] Being comfortable with the capabilities of AI is a strength and should not be a deterrence to streamlining social media workflows or redirecting human brainpower to more abstract concepts involved in strategising. However, there are some social media tasks that should remain human, namely audience inter-

action, crafting content strategies, editing captions, ensuring graphic materials align to brand guidelines, and monitoring brand safety and compliance risks.[6]

Working in a regulated sector such as healthcare requires external communications to be consistent, evidence-based, transparent, and compliant with regulations throughout the product lifecycle. Following guidelines outlined by the EMA or FDA can help ensure that sensitive information is communicated to audiences practically, factors in the health literacy of target audiences, and follows the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) legislation. When it comes to compliance and authenticity, placing human hands on the keyboard will help improve the chances that sensitive information and content resonates with target audiences and is interpreted as trustworthy.

The social media promised land

Employing this interconnectivity and convergence of technologies on social media presents both risks and rewards and requires a certain subset of skills in digital health communications to deliver informative and authentic campaigns.

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Figure 1. The roadmap to social media success

Abbreviations: KPI, key performance indicators.

Invest where your audience is

Before drafting text or visuals for social media channels, it is pertinent to have a concrete understanding of who this material is being created for. Health communications should connect with the social identity of audiences and convey actionable recommendations that align with existing cultural behaviours.[5] By surveying existing platforms, communicators can create an audience persona that outlines the base age range, location, profession, and seniority level of followers and their possible interests. This helps target content, encode messaging, and determine if the audience

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demographic shifts over time. Analytics also provide insight into audience growth and which platforms and types of content appeal to followers. A drop in engagement or total follower count may indicate a negative return on investment on one platform – a social media audit can confirm suspicions.[14] Keeping abreast of new platforms and content trends can help guide creative energy, digital marketing investments, A/B testing (comparing the perform-ance of two variations of content), and future strategies. Increasing digital noise is just one of the many obstacles to connecting with audiences in the digital age of healthcare. By

investing in platforms, content, and campaigns that attract and retain audiences, medical communicators can set their social media processes on the trajectory to success.

Relevance is relevant

Target audiences want to feel the organisation they're engaging with is authentic and adheres to their stated causes and missions. They also want to feel the information or content they're interacting with is relevant to them and the platform they're using. Communicators can routinely inspect organisational brand identity across the social media realm to ensure consistency across platforms and adherence to institutional causes or missions. Likewise, the graphic identity should be complementary and relatively modern in appearance. Updating

banner and profile images and bios will help prevent social media profiles from becoming stale. Tailoring content to platform specifications and audience needs can help maximise potential engagement and reach. Table 1 provides some recommendations to consider when adapting social media content.

Success is in the eye of the beholder

Extracting meaningful insight from social media metrics can help guide future campaigns and strategies. There is no shortage of data that can be harvested on social platforms, with most offering native or external reporting for each post, follower trends, and ad campaigns. In a sea of likes, comments, reposts, and clicks, where is the best place to start?

Campaigns should be informed by overarching goals or objectives guiding the messaging of communications. Once defined, key performance indicators (KPIs) can be explicated and measured. The most common KPIs to track are:

- Impressions (the total number of times a post was seen in users' feeds)
- Engagements (the total number of likes, comments, or shares per post)
- Clicks (the total number of times users clicked on any element in a post with their mouse or digital finger)

> *Monitoring and measuring the performance of social media posts should be second nature to most communicators.*

Content strategies should be informed by predefined goals and the KPIs that will be measured, and creative materials should be crafted with these in mind. Communicators should consider what type of content will prompt their audience to engage with a post, repost it to their networks, and take it home with them. Executing a content strategy can be made simpler using social media scheduling tools – such as Buffer,[17] Hootsuite,[18] or Later[19] – or the native scheduling services found on most platforms, like Meta Business Suite or Twitter Ads. Monitoring and measuring the performance of social media posts should be second nature to most communicators. Once analytics are performed, the results may be used to refine and adjust current strategies or creative materials. Should the goals, objectives, and KPIs be met, iterate posts and scale up for broader impact. The process can further be informed by lessons learnt from analytics, competitor surveying, and new social marketing techniques. A social listening service can take insights to the next level and there is no shortage of players on the market. These tools, such as BrandMentions,[20] Brandwatch,[21] or Meltwater,[22] allow users to gauge audience sentiment toward specific terms or phrases and opinions on current issues.[23] Tracking trending hashtags and adjacent topics can help campaigns reach more users and tailor content to existing audiences. Real-time and historical data allow communicators to measure a brand's performance and reputation in online discussions. However, with changing privacy and data access regulations, the information these tools provide is subject to limitations. Ultimately, it is the story behind the content that will determine success.

What's on the horizon?

Medical communicators will continue to contend with the shifting sands of social media in the years to come. With nearly 49% of the world's population eligible to vote in the 2024 "super election year," mis- and disinformation is bound to be rampant.[24] Digital health messaging will need to cope with foreign interference online as actors potentially seek to take advantage of the legacy of institutional distrust from the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying infodemic.

Regulatory hammers have recently come down on rapidly developing and deploying AI technologies, with the European Parliament adopting a landmark law cementing the rights and protections of humans in the face of accelerating AI.[25] Transparency is one of the concerns outlined in the act, which would see AI-generated content markedly labelled as such. Meta is already taking steps to identify AI content on Facebook, Instagram, and Threads.[26] In the face of deepfakes and deceptive images online, critical analysis and regulatory labelling will hopefully protect audiences from falling victim to deceit.

Table 1. Popular social media platforms and recommendations to tailor content

Platform	Estimated number of users[a,b]	How to tailor content
Facebook	3.049 billion	- Customise the action button on your profile to reflect your audience's needs[c] - Use language that invites comments or questions from your audience
Instagram	2 billion	- Optimise visuals for posts, reels, and stories - Optimise for mobile viewing - Update the bio link to reflect a current campaign
TikTok	1.562 billion	- Optimise videos for mobile viewing - Keep social copy concise - Trending topics and creative formats can change rapidly, adapt to the current trends
LinkedIn	1 billion	- Write longer form social copy or short-form articles - Invoke a professional tone in social copy - Take advantage of the article, document, and poll functions when crafting posts
X	619 million	- Keep social copy concise - Choose hashtags strategically - Evoke a light or humorous tone if it adheres to brand guidelines

[a] Meltwater. Global state of social media 2024.[15]

[b] LinkedIn. About us: Statistics.[16]

[c] The action button prompts users to take an action that is important to the page. See Facebook's help centre for more: https://www.facebook.com/help/977869848936797.

As technology advances and healthcare systems become more digitised, the number of people actively seeking health information online will continue to grow.[27] Digital health communications will need to adapt to the changing winds of social media to ensure uptick of key messaging and successful campaigns. Adhering to branding guidelines, tailoring content, and following a structured social media strategy are just some pointers to set medical communicators on a path forward.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Uppsala Monitoring Centre (UMC).

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Shannen Young is a communicator by trade and a creative at heart. She enjoys crafting compelling social media campaigns using several mediums, whether that be graphic design, film, data visualisations, copywriting, and more. She is passionate about telling unique stories and turning complex ideas or methodologies into digestible and engaging content. Before joining Uppsala Monitoring Centre (UMC) in 2022, she performed various communications tasks at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). She holds a BA from Simon Fraser University (Canada) and an MA from Uppsala University (Sweden).