Chapter 27
Hospital Social Media Strategies:
Patient or Organization Centric?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the role social media plays in patient communication at hospitals. The chapter explores how social media platforms are used by national and local hospitals to deliver higher quality healthcare and increase patient engagement. Using an in-depth literature review and semi-structured interviews at two local hospitals, the chapter assesses how hospitals approach traditional and social media strategies. The chapter identifies the importance of using both online and offline communication strategies for the most comprehensive and effective delivery of healthcare. The chapter also includes a discussion of how social media has the ability to influence health information seeking and the patient-physician relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Hospitals are increasingly using social media as a strategic platform to communicate with patients and increase this engagement. Social media has been shown to increase hospital revenue, improve quality of care, and strengthen patient recruitment and retention (Harris et al, 2013). Yet, traditional communication strategies are still powerful in engaging patients and should not be put on the back burner. The authors propose that effective patient engagement strategies need to include both online and offline avenues. Healthcare institutions with strategies that do not address both these avenues risk overlooking and under-serving (or not effectively serving) a significant demographic of their patient population.

This chapter will begin by examining the social media and patient engagement strategies employed by two hospitals. This will include a discussion of the social media best practices used by these hospital

systems. The authors will then explore, via in-depth interviews, how the two local hospitals implement traditional and social media strategies on a smaller scale. The chapter will highlight how these local hospitals engage patients and healthcare providers both online and offline. The authors will describe some of the difficulties these hospitals face and their efforts to address these challenges. Finally, the authors will discuss how value-based healthcare can impact the digital marketing and patient engagement strategies of these organizations.

BACKGROUND

This chapter seeks to uncover best practices used by hospitals in their efforts to engage health information seekers and inform their communities while attempting to meet their strategic objectives. This resulted in our analysis of social media, hospital and patient engagement studies as noted below.

Surveys indicate that social media is used by 65 percent of US adults who are online, and this represents nearly half of all US adults (Harris et al, 2013). Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used social media platforms with avenues, such as Vine and Instagram, gaining increasing popularity, particularly among younger adults. Social media use in the US does vary by age, but is independent of education level, health care access and race. There is no significant difference in use based on education or income among Twitter users. Black non-Hispanic Internet users (28 percent), however, are more frequent Twitter users than Hispanics (14 percent) and White non-Hispanics (12 percent). Twitter is also used far more by young adults and by those in urban and suburban areas compared to those in rural areas (Harris et al, 2013).

Given these trends, it is understandable that an increasing number of people turn to social media for health information. In the US, 80 percent of Internet users (who represent 59 percent of all US adults) seek health information online. Moreover, nearly 20 percent of users turn to social media platforms for health information—whether it is to gather information for personal conditions or to learn about family and friends' health experiences. For these individuals, the Internet is a crucial source of health information (Harris et al, 2013). Early research by the Pew Internet and American Life (2006) reported that health information seekers indicated that eight of ten Internet users, or roughly 113 million adults, have sought health information online.

Given these statistics as well as challenges and opportunities associated with technology disruptions, healthcare providers and institutions have also increasingly turned to social media to disseminate health information to patients and share information with each other. Although healthcare entities grapple with how best to deliver relevant information to patients and how to stay abreast of rapidly evolving social media trends, research indicates that between 60 to 82 percent of US state health departments use at least one social media platform. Those who are proponents of healthcare providers using social media believe they can engage in meaningful dialogue with patients and use the platforms as a way to effectively communicate time-sensitive health information (Harris et al, 2013; Richter et al, 2014).

With this communication context as the backdrop, healthcare reform has brought changes to the way both healthcare providers and patients view the provider-patient encounter. Patient care no longer means a fixation on isolated encounters; instead, the focus has shifted to long-term goals with prevention and wellness at their core (Axial Patient Engagement, 2014). This transformation means that health providers must work to develop stronger relationships with patients and be proactive about communicating with them. This shift not only affects positive behavioral change in patients, but also has the potential

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