

Chapter 79

The Emerging Hispanic Use of Online Health Information in the United States: Cultural Convergence or Dissociation?

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ABSTRACT

As health-information websites become more popular, healthcare corporations have worked quickly to create Spanish-language sites to reach the Spanish-speaking population. However, changes have to be made in order to effectively adapt to the Spanish-speaking audience. In order to be successful, site designers must create a sense of community by having interactive elements and by advertising these sites through radio or television with well-known celebrities or known figures in the healthcare realm. Further, care must be taken to ensure that the information in these sites is culturally appropriate for this audience. The successful health information website can be a strong tool for educating both Spanish and English speakers alike about preventative care, as well as treatment options, which in turn can improve health outcomes.

THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION

Virtually since the dawn of the public Internet, users have been searching for health information online. During the height of the dot com bubble, hundreds of Websites were created to provide

patients and physicians with references to health information, as well as to act as online clearing-houses for medical claims, storage archives for medical records, and other related uses. During this time period, “there were grandiose assumptions made about what the Web could do in health care” (Southwick, 2004, par. 8). Developers dreamed of revolutionizing health care by using online media to put health information in the hands of

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the consumer and therefore demystifying medicine and health choices for the patients.

To a large extent, health-related Websites have done exactly that: put the power of information at the fingertips of the user. Americans in particular have become avid consumers of online health information, with 61% of individuals in the U.S. now using the Internet to look for health information online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2009). As a result, sites like WebMD, iVillage, Medline, and others have become widely recognized brand names in health information.

Additionally, the use of these health information sites has increased each year (Seper, 2008). Today, these online health sources don't just include the well-established medical sites like Webmd.com. Now, they also include health- and medical-related blogs and message boards. From 2006 to 2008, for example, the number of blogs that discuss brand-name cholesterol treatments more than doubled (2008). These factors reveal that Internet users have evolved from being just consumers of online health information to producers of this information.

This evolution of online health information has been both a blessing and a curse in terms of healthcare outcomes for these users. On one hand, "e-patients" are now able to research their conditions online, connect with others with similar conditions, and read about groundbreaking new treatments. All of these things can be very positive in terms of the health outcomes for patients. Dr. Harrison G. Weed, professor of internal medicine at the Ohio State University's College of Medicine adds, "As a general rule, the squeaky wheel gets the grease – that is, you get better medical care if you're involved – if you ask questions" (Seper, 2008, par. 9). Dr. George Kikano, Chair of Family Medicine at University Hospitals Case Medical Center supports this claim, adding that "It [these medical sites] makes my patients come and ask me the right questions" (2008, par. 7).

These benefits, however, are connected to the access patients have to this information and the conceptual and linguistic frameworks they have for understanding such information. As a result, culture can become an important factor affecting how successfully different groups can use and apply online health information. Such a situation can be particularly interesting if the individuals accessing such information represent a minority culture – and a minority language – accessing this online information within the context of another nation or culture. This situation, however, is increasingly the case in the United States – the world's largest consumer of online health and medical information – where a growing Hispanic population is increasingly turning to the Web for information on health-related or medical issues.

This chapter examines the following factors related to this situation:

- The Hispanic presence on the Web and how that relates to accessing and using health-related information
- Traditional Hispanic attitudes toward health care in general and connect those attitudes toward information seeking behavior for health information
- The healthcare industry's current approaches for getting Hispanic users on their sites and retaining these users
- The ways in which the English-speaking biomedical view of medicine is being imposed on these Spanish-speaking users through these Websites and how that may result in cultural convergence between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking groups
- The possible health outcomes for Hispanic users that result from greater utilization of these health Websites
- Potential best practices for health writers, managers, and Web developers for attracting and retaining Hispanic audiences

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