



Healthcare Marketing White Paper



SOCIALIZING MEDICINE

HOW SOCIAL CHANNELS ARE
CHANGING THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN PHYSICIANS
AND PATIENTS



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Patients are now turning to their social networks to seek health advice and forge closer relationships with their doctors. Armed with smart phones, tablets, and home computers, today's patients are taking a more proactive approach to their healthcare by researching care decisions online, rather than relying solely on advice from their physicians.

According to a study conducted by Pew Internet, 72% of internet users search for health information online, and 31% of cell phone owners search for health information on their phones. Patients today are looking for a more convenient and robust approach to their care that allows them to speak to their physicians in between appointments and through mediums that they use on a daily basis, such as social media and email.

This white paper reviews the socialization of medicine through health information sites, online physician reviews and social media, and how physicians and hospitals can leverage these channels to keep up with their patients' needs.

THE RISING TIDE OF E-PATIENTS

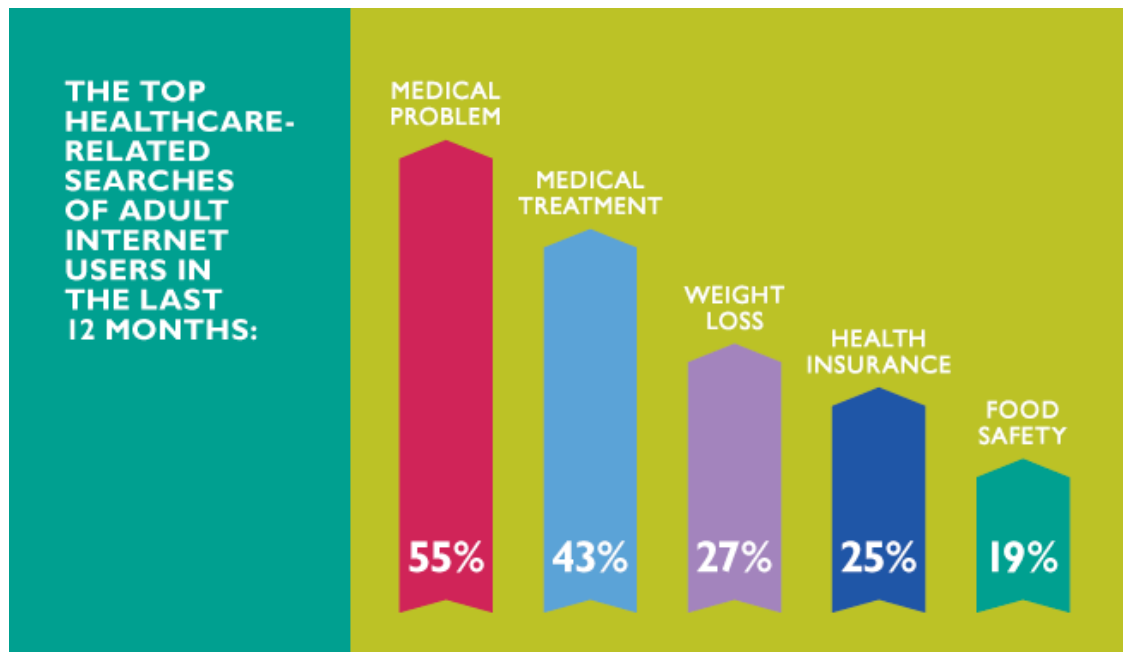
According to Nicola Ziady in “The Truth Between Patients and E-Patients,” e-Patients “are health consumers who use the web to find information about certain medical conditions. These savvy surfers also use electronic communication to source information for family, friends and their own ailments.”

Although in the past “e-” often stood for electronic, the “e-” in e-Patient represents words such as: equipped, enabled, empowered, engaged, equals, emancipated, and expert. The main difference between a regular patient and an e-Patient is that e-Patients take a more active role in their healthcare by seeking out health information on their own and working together with their doctors to choose the best treatments and care. Regular patients tend to rely solely on their doctors for information, diagnoses, and treatment plans.

As Michael Spector of *The New Yorker* stated, “The era of paternalistic medicine, where the doctor knew best and the patient felt lucky to have him, has ended. We don’t worship authority figures anymore. Our health-care system has become impersonal, mechanized, and hollow, and it has failed millions of people, many of whom want to find a way to regain control of their own medical decisions.”

According to a national survey conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, 72% of internet users looked for health information online including searches on serious conditions, general information, and minor health problems.

Of this group of people, 77% started their search with a search engine such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo, 13% started their search at a site that specializes in health information such as WebMD, 2% said they started their search on a general site such as Wikipedia, and 1% said they started their search on a social network, such as Facebook.



Other common searches were for: drug safety or recalls, a drug that the person saw advertised, medical test results, caring for an aging relative or friend, pregnancy and childbirth, and how to reduce your costs.

This study also found that the people most likely to search for health information online to figure out a possible diagnosis are: women, younger people, white adults, those with a household income of \$75,000 or more, and those with a college or graduate degree.

How to attract e-Patients to your hospital or practice:

- Use search engine optimization (SEO) to get patients to land on your website when searching for health information online.
- Post content related to the top healthcare searches: diseases and medical problems, medical treatments and procedures, weight loss, health insurance, and food and safety recalls.
- Create a mobile site for e-Patients who are searching for health information on their cell phones.
- Use search engine marketing (SEM) to promote specific medical treatments and procedures, specialties, and physicians for e-Patients searching for this information.

PHYSICIAN ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

While researching general health information online is popular, a survey conducted by Avvo found that 73% of patients research physicians online. This research includes: patient reviews, disciplinary history, physicians' resumes, and published articles. Many patients are reviewing this information prior to making an appointment or switching physicians in order to make an informed decision, rather than relying on referrals or word-of-mouth. Because of this, it's important that physicians are aware of what is being said about them online, and take the time to generate their own content.

PHYSICIAN REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

USE:

- GOOGLE ALERTS
- MDWebPro
- GET MY REVIEWS
- NAYMZ
- RANKUR
- SOCIALMENTION
- TECHNORATI
- TRACKUR
- WHOS TALKIN

“Great bedside manner!”

Physician named to health committee.

...published in medical journal.

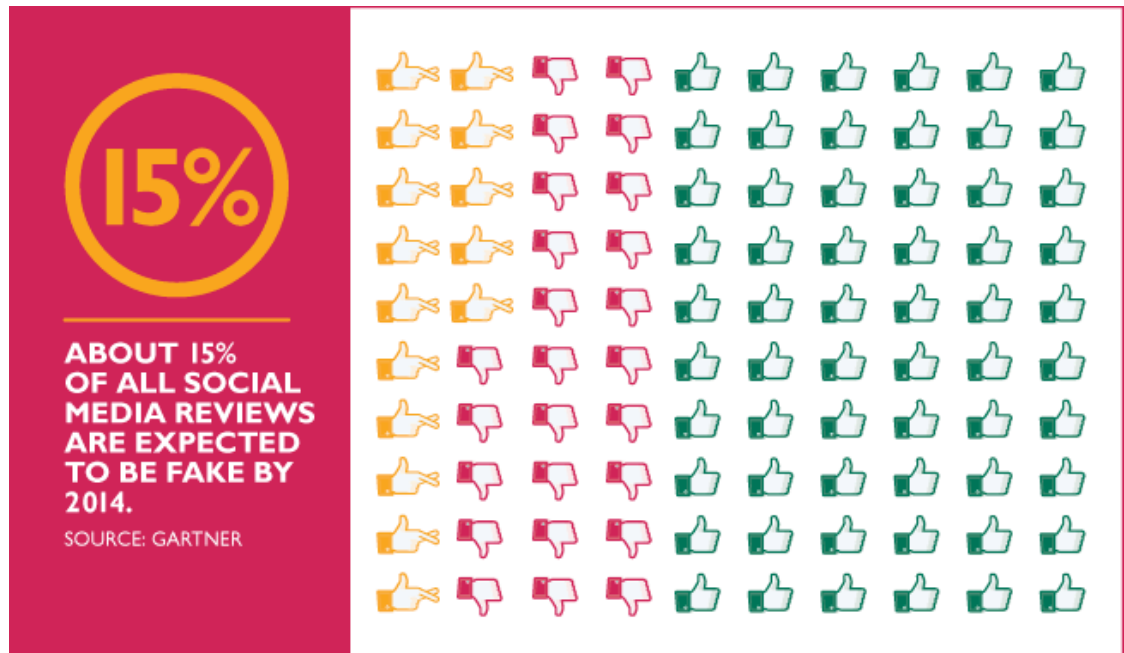
"I highly recommend her."

Online Fraud and Misrepresentation

Because online physician and medical information has grown significantly over the years and the number of e-Patients searching for that information has steadily increased, physicians now should be conscious of online fraud. Sheryl Cash of American Medical News reported that physicians can fall victim to online identity theft and misrepresentation by people posing as them, and from fake patient reviews.

Dr. Michael Sevilla, a family physician in Youngstown, Ohio, has had his blog content stolen and reposted on other blogs without his permission. He has also had people steal his content and then respond to consumer comments as if they were Dr. Sevilla.

However, the more likely misrepresentation online will occur through fake patient reviews that are posted either by competing physicians, online bots, or just someone with a vendetta against a certain physician. According to Gartner Inc, a technology research firm, about 15% of all social media reviews are expected to be fake by 2014.



To help combat this, physicians can take a proactive approach to managing their online reputation. “This includes physicians managing their own websites, ensuring that the information posted on physician review and information sites is accurate, and asking for patients to post positive feedback and reviews,” suggests Cash.

Physician Review Sites

Staying up to date on patient reviews on sites such as HealthGrades, Vitals, and Angie’s List can be time consuming, but it is important to read those reviews and address them in daily practice. While some may just be a disgruntled patient who is having a rough day, reviews on sites like Angie’s List, which require reviewers to pay to post a review, should be taken seriously.

MD Web Pro created a free tool called Get My Reviews that will make the monitoring process easier. This tool gathers patient reviews of physicians on the top 18 review sites, including Wellness.com, Yahoo! Local, and Citysearch, and sends physicians a summarized report. It will also continue to track any new patient reviews on the sites.



However, it can be detrimental to rely solely on patient review sites because oftentimes patients will write a negative review if the doctor doesn't give them exactly what they want, but what the patient wants and what the physician believes is right, isn't always the same. Rather than overprescribe or overtest just to satisfy patients, doctors can generate patient responses on multiple channels.

Steven Bates, a plastic surgeon in Palo Alto, CA, created a new system to help combat the current inefficiencies of patient surveys called DocsVox. DocsVox uses email, social media, and mobile apps to generate more patient responses and create more statistically significant ratings. This new system is just one reason why it's a good idea for hospitals and physicians to embrace social media.

Physicians on Social Media

More commonly, physicians are using social media, websites, and blogs to connect with patients professionally online. There are two main reasons physicians should take the time to develop an online presence: to build relationships with patients and for reputation management.

When it comes to building relationships online, physicians can provide enough information about themselves and their practice so patients can feel like they really know them. Dr. Howard Luks, a member of the External Advisory Board for the Mayo Clinic Center for Social Media, said: "the most meaningful reason to establish a presence is that patients can find you and perhaps learn a bit more about your perspective, approach and rapport with your patient base."

If physicians have a website that generates content, they can also control what messages are associated with their name and ensure that a lot of quality information will pop up in the first page of their Google search. If prospective patients find this type of information first, they may never read the online reviews, or not rely as heavily on them.

Creating content on a blog, Facebook page, or Twitter account won't prevent patients from making negative comments, but it will "drown out or dilute content or comments that exist on many of these physician grading platforms when a patient performs a Google search of your name," said Dr. Luks.



Even if physicians currently don't have the time to start posting or aren't sure if they want to add a new social media site to the mix, Cash suggests they set up accounts under their names "to prevent other people or organizations from misrepresenting or diluting [their] identity."

How to manage physicians' reputations online:

- Post a lot of quality, general health information via a blog or social media site, and use SEO so patients who are searching for the content will find it.
- Post information about how you run your practice and some personal information so patients can feel like they are getting to know you. It's also a good idea to post short videos with health tips or bio information.
- Respond to any questions or comments received from patients on these platforms, even the negative ones.
- Do not respond to specific health inquiries in public to avoid violating HIPAA (see next section).
- Set up a Google alert with your name to keep track of what is being said about you online. Read reviews online and adjust your practice as needed to provide the best patient experience.
- Invite current patients to your social networks online (keep personal and professional accounts separate) and to write reviews.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN HEALTHCARE & HIPAA

All of these tactics can help combat the effects of misrepresentation, online identity theft, and physician rating sites. By making physicians more accessible, it allows them to build stronger relationships with their patients and boost patient satisfaction in a safer, healthier way. These tactics are even more effective when they are echoed by the physicians' practices or hospitals they are affiliated with.

Social content strategies for hospitals and physicians

Compared to other areas of business, healthcare is falling behind in the realm of social media. Part of this problem is figuring out how to walk the fine line between the casual nature of social media, and the seriousness of healthcare and the wellbeing of patients.

It's important for hospitals to be reputable, but not all content on their social media accounts has to be formal. It's recommended that healthcare organizations think of social media as a place to promote a lifestyle and attract people with similar interests by serving as an information exchange and encouraging patients to change their behavior, rather than as a daily newsletter stuffed with marketing materials.

It's okay to post marketing materials occasionally to keep patients updated on new physicians, services, and procedures available at the hospital or practice, but it should be presented in an engaging, conversational way.

To achieve this balance, it's a good idea to mix up content with interesting articles found on other blogs, infographics, recipes, and funny pictures. Give patients information that they will find helpful and can actually use. It's also okay to make people laugh; healthcare organizations should strive to come across as human, rather than a robot churning out posts that were preloaded months in advance.



Another reason many healthcare organizations are struggling with the use of social media is that they are hesitant to communicate with patients online due to the fear of violating HIPAA. Although this is a valid concern, the truth is that the odds of a marketing professional, staff member or physician violating HIPAA on social media are the same as in any other environment, including within the hospital or at a social event.

HIPAA - compliance in a social world

Nicola Ziady explains that HIPAA (in relation to marketing) simply restricts hospitals or physician groups from using private patient information to promote products or services without written permission, and that a patient may “revoke a written authorization at any time.”

Keeping that in mind, Leigh McMillan suggests that physicians do not talk about patients, even without stating their name, on social networks. This doesn't mean that they can't get inspiration for a post from one of their patients, but rather than writing about the patient, make the illness or condition the subject.

Once a post or tweet is complete, McMillan recommends applying the “elevator test” before submitting. This means that authors should read the post out loud, and if there is any part that they would not be comfortable saying in public, they should not publish it online.

While healthcare marketers still have some catching up to do, a lot of progress has been made. In The Mayo Clinic's Health Care Social Media List there are 1,500 hospitals that actively use social media accounts to improve brand reputation and retain patients.

How to effectively use social media in healthcare:

- Post helpful health information and tips to teach patients about health risks, symptoms, and encourage them to lead healthier lifestyles in between office visits.
- Post content according to a health editorial calendar, ex. post information about women's heart health in February, men's health and prostate cancer during November, the flu during the winter months, outdoor allergies and skin cancer during the spring and summer months, and mammograms and breast cancer during October.
- Post blogs or interviews from physicians to share more technical health information.
- Do not respond to specific patient questions or requests publicly or post private patient information without permission to avoid violating HIPAA.
- Occasionally post marketing information to update patients about new physicians, procedures, treatments, offices, or events.
- Share fun information, recipes, and community events to encourage patients and families to participate in healthy activities.

EMBRACING THE NEW GENERATION OF E-PATIENTS

This new generation of e-Patients scours the internet for health information, hospital, practice, and physician reviews, and testimonials from patients in similar situations. The days when physician opinions and suggestions were never questioned are over and patients are taking their care into their own hands by researching their options online. Healthcare organizations and physicians should allow themselves to be found with content, SEO and SEM, otherwise prospective patients will land with competitors.

Does your hospital or practice use social media to connect with e-Patients? Do you know what is being said about your hospital, practice, and physicians online? Whether you participate in the online conversation is up to you, but your refusal to join in won't stop the conversation from going on without you. If you don't take a look, you could be missing out on a large population of e-Patients that is steadily growing. Visit smithandjones.com to learn more. ■

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