

## WINTER 2015 NEWSLETTER

Social media is here in a big way, and it's here to stay. Facebook reports that it has more than 1 billion users. The fastest growing age bracket for both Facebook and Google Plus is 45-54. Twitter's growth is primarily with an older group – 55-64. According to surveys done by the DC Interactive Group, 41% say that social media would impact their choice of healthcare provider. That same group estimates that 42% of all consumers use social media to check reviews for providers, treatment options, and products.



Margie Satinsky

### BITING THE BULLET ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Are you interested in getting started with social media or in re-evaluating your current efforts? In this newsletter we've collaborated with three experienced professionals to provide guidance.

Let's start at the beginning - the potential benefits of using social media for a medical practice. According to Amanda Kanaan, President and Founder of WhiteCoat Designs in Raleigh, NC, social media can help your practice in the following ways:

- Boost search engine rankings: Social media is now part of Google's ranking algorithm, so engaging on social media can literally help your website rank higher when people search for physicians in your specialty.
- Enable you to reach new networks of patients: If your patients like or share your posts with their own networks, that action introduces your practice to a whole new network of potential new patients.
- Increase traffic to your website: Sharing blog links on your website boosts your overall traffic, enhancing search engine rankings.
- Position you as an expert in your specialty by giving your practice the opportunity to offer educational tips.
- Facilitate patient communication: If you want to promote a new service or inform patients about a weather-related closure, social media is a cost effective way to spread the word.

Here are our top five recommendations for using social media to share information on your medical practice:

1. **Use social media purposefully to support your practice's goals.** Clarify your overall intention before spending time and money on the project.
2. **Understand the nuts and bolts of social media** so you can take advantage of available opportunities.
3. **Develop a plan for online reputation management (ORM)** before you experience a crisis.

4. **Use social media safely** to avoid inappropriate disclosures of protected health information (PHI) that are HIPAA violations.
5. **Select the appropriate option** for maintaining your social media presence.

### **Use social media purposefully to support your practice's goals**

A well-planned social media strategy can be a powerful method for medical practices to communicate with existing patients, potential patients, and medical colleagues. Jennifer Morris, Director of Marketing for Grassroutes Networking in Raleigh, NC, elaborates: "Connecting with patients and colleagues online can provide practical business intelligence insights that help improve customer service and enhance communications with both patients and physician colleagues." A positive online identity for your practice or organization tells viewers your unique characteristics and facilitates their contacting you to make an appointment.

Amanda Kanaan adds a word of caution, emphasizing the importance of controlling the online conversation about your practice. "Focus on the messages that you post, your response to what others post regarding you and/or your practice, and the opportunities that you have with different social media outlets. We think 'manage' is a key word here. Put yourself in the driver's seat and strap yourself in tightly."

### **Understand the nuts and bolts of social media and venture slowly**

Effective use of social media involves far more than hastily posting a message and firing off a quick response to those who send messages to you. Know your options, and start slowly with LinkedIn and/or blogging, two methods of online communication that can be very effective. LinkedIn was initially designed for professional networking, not for publicly visible personal interaction. Learn how to use one platform effectively and safely before moving to the next. Blogging (short for web logging), too, is a relatively simple way to have an online conversation, provided you have a clear focus and intent. Alice Saunders of Trisecta in Raleigh, NC offers her insight on increasing your return on investment (ROI): "A blog can help first-time visitors to your website better understand your credentials and expertise, resulting in more new-patient conversions. For example, patients might choose an oncologist whose blog focuses on a specific type of cancer or whose blog demonstrates an awareness of the latest advances and clinical trials. As practices look for innovative ways to interact with patients and help them manage chronic conditions like Type II diabetes, a blog can help clinicians provide important educational information to patients that they might not otherwise have provided because of busy schedules."

Explore and learn how you can strengthen your social media presence with some of the social media sites on which your patients rely most heavily (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google Plus, and YouTube). Strategically using these sites can increase your Google ranking.

### **Have a plan for online reputation management (ORM)**

A practice-owned blog and LinkedIn allow you to exercise significant control over both content and participant responses. Sooner or later, however, you may be reluctantly forced to address your reputation on platforms such as Google and Twitter that allow users to critique your practice without your knowledge or approval. Amanda

Kanaan points out that online reputation monitoring “is arguably even more vital to your online marketing strategy than social media because doctors’ reputations are really all they have. Even if you have a great social media presence, bad online reviews will discourage new patients from choosing your practice. Patients search online for doctors in the same way that they search for a purse or a new pair of shoes; they pay attention to the reviews and comments of other patients.”

There’s no way to avoid negative reviews. The best approach is to manage them when they happen. Our experts offer these practical tips for maintaining a healthy online reputation:

- Use social media management tools like Hootsuite and Google Alerts to monitor your online presence. For example, with the free Google Alert tool you set alerts for specific search criteria (e.g., your practice name in quotation marks) and Google sends daily or weekly emails telling you what people are saying online.
- Google your name/practice name to determine which healthcare review sites rank the highest (e.g. Healthgrades.com and Vitals.com) and target these sites first. Identify sites that have very few reviews or negative reviews and then create a strategy to increase the number of positive reviews on these sites.
- Respond promptly and appropriately to every negative comment with a positive one. Follow up with factual information that can help counteract any misunderstandings.
- Develop a process for responding to negative reviews, making sure to avoid responding to a negative review or comment until your natural emotions are fully in check. Knee-jerk reactions and hastily written responses to negative comments may inadvertently disclose PHI without considering the potential of a HIPAA violation.
- Determine who is most capable of crafting a response that turns the negative into a positive. Different individuals may draft, review, and approve the response. Who is most familiar with the options that exist on a specific site, be it Google or one of the healthcare-specific websites? Depending on the nature of the negative comment, it may be smart to use the appeal process that some sites offer.
- Encourage patients to post glowing reviews of your practice; several positive reviews can outweigh the occasional negative one. Tactics to encourage patients to post positive reviews include: (1) giving patients a business card with a link to your patient survey; (2) posting links to the review sites on your social media pages and website; (3) using your secure patient portal to remind all patients to post positive comments; and (4) placing an iPad in your office so patients can complete a review when they check out.

### **Use social media safely**

Avoid inappropriate disclosures of protected health information (PHI) that are HIPAA violations when using social media. The theory behind social media is that participants voluntarily consent to contribute social and personal data to a social media electronic storage system. Depending on the type of social media, there may be ways to restrict access to some of that information so not all users can see it. Medical practices that use social media are not exempt from HIPAA. As Covered Entities, they are obligated to protect the use and disclosure of protected health

information (PHI) and to honor the specific patient rights that are identified in the Privacy Rule as amended by the HITECH Act of 2009 and the 2013 Omnibus Final Rule.

Let's examine several real life situations that we've seen with clients. What if a healthcare provider or practice has a social media profile and a patient "friend" connects with the physician or practice? There's a strong risk of inferring a patient-provider relationship – not information that should be publically shared. If the communication mentions treatment for a particular condition, there's another potential HIPAA violation. Voluntary posting by the patient and/or provider or practice does not exempt Covered Entities from obtaining written patient authorization prior to disclosing PHI.

Here's another frequently occurring situation that may be a HIPAA violation. Patients often like the convenience of websites such as [www.caringbridge.com](http://www.caringbridge.com) or [www.carepages.com](http://www.carepages.com) to communicate with family and friends when they are ill or in the hospital. People sign up to be part of a group that receives blog posts on the patient's condition. All too often, healthcare providers comment on the condition and treatment, mistakenly assuming that the blog post is equivalent to patient authorization to disclose PHI.

Social media and HIPAA are related, not incompatible. Providers, not patients, are responsible for maintaining HIPAA compliance. The safest way to communicate with patients is through a secure patient portal. However, if you expect to enter into social media "friendships," require patients to sign a written authorization regarding online disclosure before entering into the online relationship. Even with the patient's written authorization, review what you post, making sure not to use or disclose PHI without proper prior authorization. For additional guidance, read the [\*\*Federation of State Medical Boards' Model Policy Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Media and Social Networking in Medical Practice\*\*](#).

### **Select the appropriate option for maintaining your social media presence**

Many practices make the mistake of delegating the responsibility for developing and maintaining social media to an enthusiastic workforce member. If that individual understands the big picture – i.e., all that we've mentioned above – the decision to select an internal person may be appropriate. But if the individual assuming the responsibility for social media doesn't understand the context into which social media must be put and doesn't have the time to learn new skills, you may be better served by outsourcing the responsibility for some or all of it to qualified professionals. Online reputation monitoring and management is offered as a specific service by a number of companies, but it is important to choose someone who understands the unique hurdles that medical practices must cross with respect to social media and healthcare rating sites.

## Need Help with Social Media?

Satinsky Consulting, LLC can assist with your social media strategy in one or more of the following ways:

- **Defining practical goals for social media** that are consistent with your practice goals
- **Assessing the social media and ORM qualifications of your staff members**
- **Recommending qualified vendors** to assist with some or all aspects of social media
- **Assisting with your interview process** to select a social media or ORM professional
- **Ongoing reviewing** of your practice's social media and ORM strategy and plans

## Our Complete Range of Services

Satinsky Consulting, LLC offers a broad range of services to medical practices and the organizations that support them. Our services include:

- HIPAA Privacy and Security Rule Compliance and Training
- Medical Practice Start-up and Expansion of Services and/or Locations
- Information Technology Planning and Implementation Consulting and Meeting Requirements for Meaningful Use
- Managed Care Rate Negotiations and Contract Review
- Revenue Cycle Management Consulting
- Strategic Planning
- Operational Analysis and Improvement
- Medical Practice Marketing
- Development of Website Content
- Human Resource Management in Medical Practice Settings
- Network of Expert Medical Practice Consulting Resources
- Speaking and Teaching on Medical Practice Management

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if you need help with these or other related services.