

Social Media: Understanding Opportunities and Pitfalls

By Margie Satinsky

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 percent say that social media would impact their choice of health care provider. That same group estimates that 42 percent of all consumers use social media to check reviews for providers, treatment options and products. We offer four recommendations for using social media to share information on your medical practice:

- Use it purposefully to support your practice's goals. A presence on social media that is unrelated to your overall intent is a waste of time and money.
- Understand the nuts and bolts of social media so you can take advantage of the opportunities that it offers.
- Use social media safely to avoid inappropriate disclosures of protected health information (PHI) that are HIPAA violations.
- Select the appropriate option for maintaining your social media presence.

Use Social Media Purposefully to Support Your Practice's Goals

Social media can be a powerful method of communicating with patients, potential patients and medical colleagues. Amanda Kanaan of WhiteCoat Designs in Raleigh explains 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 oppor-

tunities 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. For more suggestions, go to <http://www.whitecoat-designs.com/blog/> and click on "Social Media for Doctors: How to Control the Conversation Online."

Understand the Nuts and Bolts of Social Media and Take It Slowly

Using social media effectively 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 designed from the outset for professional networking rather than 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 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 is focused 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

*Margie Satinsky is president of Satinsky Consulting L.L.C., a Durham consulting firm that specializes in medical practice management. She's the author of numerous books and articles, including *Medical Practice Management in the 21st Century*. For more information, visit www.satinskyconsulting.com.*



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."

Learn how to strengthen your social media presence with the top five sites that Google uses in its ranking algorithm (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google Plus and YouTube). Monitor your profiles on the top sites and respond quickly to any negative comments. Social media management tools like Hootsuite and Google Alerts make the monitoring process more efficient.

Here's how the free Google Alerts tool works. 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. If comments are negative, you can respond quickly and appropriately, showing both concern and timeliness of your response and perhaps counteracting the complaint. Content is everything. Make it meaningful and reliable so patients and colleagues know they can trust your advice.

Use Social Media Safely to Avoid Inappropriate Disclosures of Protected Health Information (PHI)

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 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.

What if a health care 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 situation that occurs frequently and may be a HIPAA violation. Patients often like the convenience of websites such as www.caringbridge.com or 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, health care providers comment on the condition and treatment, mistakenly assuming that the blog post is equivalent to patient authorization to reveal PHI.

Still another common situation arises when someone posts a negative comment about a provider and/or practice. In many

instances, the individual physician or practice has a knee-jerk reaction and counters the comment as quickly as possible. Often the provider discloses PHI without even thinking about the potential HIPAA violation.

Social media and HIPAA are not incompatible. Still, it’s important to know that 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 Federa-

tion of State Medical Boards’ Model Policy Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Media and Social Networking in Medical Practice (<http://www.fsmb.org/Media/Default/PDF/FSMB/Advocacy/pub-social-media-guidelines.pdf>).

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 or have the time to learn new skills, you may be better served by outsourcing the responsibility to a qualified professional.



**Drossman
Gastroenterology**
55 Vilcom Center Drive
Boyd Hall, Suite 110
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
919.929.7990

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