Effective Use of Social Media to Promote Your Practice, Part 1

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This article is the first of a two-part series on using social media effectively to promote your practice. The second article will appear in the next edition of The Triangle Physician.

Introduction

Even before the 2016 presidential election, social media had clearly established itself as a preferred means of communication. Then, in the second quarter of 2017, Facebook reported that it had two billion active users per month. Twitter, which allows registered users to read and post short messages, had 328 million active users. Instagram, the mobile photo-sharing network, had 700 million active users per month in April 2017. YouTube has 1.3 billion users of its online video service. Social media has a huge impact on choice of healthcare provider, and many consumers use social media to check reviews for providers, treatment options and products.

Social media has both positive and negative potential. When used thoughtfully and purposively, it can support your practice by attracting new patients, educating existing patients and sharing information with colleagues. When used spontaneously and thoughtlessly, it can cause confusion, violate privacy requirements and place your practice in a compromising position.

For the best outcomes, plan your strategy and think carefully before posting. Assisted by colleagues Alice Saunders at Trisecta and Nancy MacCreery at Broad Reach Marketing Services, we offer four recommendations for using social media to share information:

• 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 options for maintaining your social media presence.

Use Social Media Purposefully to Support Your Practice’s Goals

First, determine your objective: what do you want to accomplish and with whom do you want to have the conversation? The messages that you post, your response to what others post regarding you and/or your practice and the places where you post messages are a reflection of your image and reputation. For example, a thoughtfully composed video on Facebook can be a good way to explain your unique practice philosophy and describe the experience of a first visit. If you’re specifically targeting millennials, consider the use of Instagram as well as your own comfort level in using it. Having a social media presence can also save time for your practice. A blog post or video that helps patients understand more about national guideline and protocol changes for a particular disease or condition may help you and your staff deal more efficiently with patients concerned about the change.

Even if you don’t actively participate in social media, it is important to monitor your online reputation, especially on rating sites. Here’s a link to an article by Broad Reach Marketing on this topic: (http://www.broadreachmarketingservices.com/blog/4-tips-for-protecting-your-practices-online-reputation)

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

Using social media effectively involves far more than hastily posting a message or firing off a quick response to those who send messages to you. Know your options and use the platforms that will best connect with your desired audience. Avoid joining all the platforms at once. Instead, priori-
tize your efforts and learn how to use one platform effectively and safely before adding another. Before you start posting or blogging, take time to look at what others do and observe your own reaction.

To connect with medical colleagues, you may want to start with LinkedIn, as it was designed for professional networking. You can join groups created around industries and interests in order to allow members to learn about trends and developments and exchange ideas. These “gated” groups vet members before allowing them to join.

Blogging (short for web logging), too, is another way to have an online conversation, provided it serves your objectives and interests. A well-written blog can attract visitors to your website, help them appreciate your credentials and expertise and provide fresh content to increase your “findability” in search results. Be sure to write about topics that are interesting, helpful or educational for the audience. Make your content meaningful and reliable so patients and colleagues know they can trust your advice.

Here’s an example of a blog strategy used by a concierge physician who is trying to build his new practice. Knowing that the word “concierge” means different things to different people, his first blog described this model of practice and the advantages that it offers. Subsequent blogs demonstrated his medical competence in dealing with both chronic conditions such as Type II diabetes and with seasonal health risks such as flu, tick bites and sunburn. The goal of these blogs is to attract patients to the website to learn even more. Although the blogs don’t replace a face-to-face conversation, they help the physician establish credibility and/or build a relationship with existing or potential patients.

As you progress, you may want to add other social networks. Take the time to research your options, make sure they fit your target audience and resources and don’t jeopardize your compliance with relevant privacy laws such as HIPAA. Do you want to use videos and graphics? Many practices use Facebook to announce the opening of a practice or an addition of a service or location. When they do, they focus on general information, steering clear of conversations that reveal personal information about a patient. Twitter is also popular, attracting more male users. Images and video are important to engage users but are especially important on platforms like Instagram and Pinterest.

Building a social media presence can raise the awareness of your practice, but it can be time consuming. It takes time to monitor your profiles on any site and respond to questions and comments, including any negative comments, on a timely basis. Free social media management tools like Google Alerts, Hootsuite, and Social Mention can make the monitoring process more efficient. With Google Alerts, for example, you set alerts for specific search criteria (e.g. your practice name in quotation marks) and Google sends immediate, 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.

Visit this link to learn more about getting more from your social media: