

SHOULD HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

CSC

Global Institute for Emerging Healthcare Practices

Key Points

1. Social media is a radical change in the means of communication. Do not underestimate its ability to work for or against your organization.
2. Healthcare organizations are using social media as an important tool to connect consumers and providers.
3. Take precautions: develop a policy to govern your employees' use of social media. Also use social media to monitor, enhance and protect your brand/reputation.
4. Rather than take a "wait-and-see" approach, start now, start small and measure progress.
5. Plan a strategy for how social media can help you accomplish your strategic organizational goals, not just your marketing and communications goals.

Introduction

Social media may presage the most important change in the way we communicate since Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1440. We are only just beginning to understand the impact social media can have on business in general and healthcare in particular.

In less than a decade, hundreds of millions of people globally have become active users of social media sites — the most popular of all Internet destinations. Social media is a radically different way to communicate because it breaks through three barriers that heretofore were major limiting factors: geography, time and cost.

Social media is changing the way organizations think about accomplishing their business objectives. The train has left the station. Few think social media is a passing fad. Thus, healthcare organizations must now answer two main questions:

1. What am I going to do *about* social media?
2. What am I going to do *with* social media?

Regarding the first question, it is critical that all organizations develop a *social media policy*. Even if you do not currently have an active social media presence, your employees and your customers are actively using social media now. Therefore, you need both a "protective" social media policy and an outreach program to educate your employees about appropriate social media use. A recent global survey of over 4,000 IT security practitioners revealed that almost two-thirds believe that social media poses a significant business risk to their organization. Yet, only 29 percent said they have adequate controls in place to manage that risk.¹

Regarding the second question, we believe healthcare organizations should be developing a *social media strategy* now. What is your organization going to do with social media now and what are your aspirational goals? What strategic business goals will you advance using social media? If you take a "wait-and-see" approach now you may soon find yourself trying to catch up with others in your market.

The recommendations we offer at the end of this paper apply to all healthcare organizations. While social media currently tends to be located in marketing, communication and recruiting departments, it is beginning to spread throughout organizations. Thus, other departments — particularly those involved in reimbursement, finance, clinical improvement and product development — should proactively focus on how social media can help advance organizational goals. To this end, consider the 14 healthcare business goals identified in Table 1. This paper describes best practices from early adopters that illustrate how healthcare companies have employed social media to accomplish these goals.

Social Media²

- Allows a wide variety of content formats (text, photos, video)
- Is device indifferent (computers, tablets, mobile/smartphone devices)
- Facilitates speed and breadth of information dissemination
- Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication
- Allows communication to take place in real time or asynchronously over time
- Extends engagement by creating real time events, extending online interactions offline or augmenting live events online
- Allows different levels of engagement

Table 1. Healthcare Business Goals Advanced by Social Media

Communications
1. Marketing
2. Workforce recruitment
3. Brand management
4. Reputation management
5. Consumer relations
Information Sharing
6. Consumer/patient/health professional education
7. Health professional collaboration
8. Community creation
Clinical Outcomes
9. Wellness
10. Population and patient monitoring
11. Care management
12. Care coordination
Speed Innovation
13. Clinical trial recruitment
14. Surveillance, analysis, product development

Source: Global Institute for Emerging Healthcare Practices, CSC, 2011

What Is Social Media?

There are many definitions of social media. No one is definitive. We take the most frequently used words in 30 social media experts' descriptions of the concept (see Figure 1) and use them in our working definition.

Social media is the process of people using online tools and platforms to share content and information through conversation and communication.

Figure 1. Words used to Define Social Media
(text size indicates frequency of use)



Source: Global Institute for Emerging Healthcare Practices, CSC, 2011

Familiar Examples of Social Media Sites

Facebook — A social networking website that allows users to create a personal profile, connect with others, exchange messages, and join common-interest user sites.

YouTube — A media sharing platform that allows users to view and share videos with a global audience.

Twitter — A micro-blogging site that allows users to communicate with each other and share information through short (140 characters) messages, or “tweets.”

Wikipedia — A free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. One of the most comprehensive sources of knowledge online, and a frequent source of misinformation.

Weblogs/Blogs — Tumblr, WordPress, Blogger and others allow users to generate their own content, whether it is image based, video based, or the plain old written word, which they can share with anyone they want.

The speed at which social media has been adopted in one short decade is without parallel. Since its launch in a Harvard dormitory in 2004, Facebook now counts more than 750 million users worldwide. Similarly, Twitter was launched in 2006 and has now amassed 200 million accounts.^{3,4} A year ago the number was 65 million. At the start of 2009 it was 2 million. Every day, the world tweets the equivalent of 8,123 copies of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.⁵ Of the 75-80 percent of U.S. adults who use the Internet, almost two-thirds (62 percent) are active users of social media.^{6,7} Social media accounts for nearly a quarter (23 percent) of time spent online, more than any other type of Internet destination (Table 2).

Table 2. Most Popular Internet Destinations

Rank	Internet Destination	Percentage of Total Internet Time
1.	Social Networks and Blogs	23%
2.	Online Games	10%
3.	E-mail	8%
4.	Portals	5%
5.	Videos/Movies	4%

Source: Nielsen and NM Incite, 2011⁸

Note: 35 percent of total Internet time is distributed across 75 “other” online categories that include multi-category entertainment, Internet tools/web services, mass merchandiser, corporate information and sports.

Business Use of/Attitudes Toward Social Media

A 2010 survey of 2,100 *Harvard Business Review* subscribers from around the world found that nearly two-thirds of represented organizations are using, or plan to use, social media.⁹ A U.S. survey conducted in 2010 found that 60 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies had active Twitter pages and 56 percent had active Facebook pages.¹⁰

The attitudes expressed by *HBR* subscribers are instructive and paint the following picture. On the one hand, most believed social media is “not a passing fad” and that “the use of social media by our organization will grow significantly over the next few years.” In slightly more than four out of 10 organizations “social media is an important component of our overall marketing strategy” and “using social media is integral to our overall company goals and strategy.” On the other hand, most agreed that “our organization has a significant learning curve to overcome before we can utilize social media” and one-half believed that “until we are able to clearly measure the impact of social media, it will not be taken seriously in our organization.” Four out of 10 said that use of social media is a “tactical rather than strategic” decision in their company and only about one-third agreed that “social media has been designated as a high priority by our organization’s executives. Of course another way to understand this finding is that, at this early stage, as many as one third felt that executives in their organization consider social media a high priority.

When asked which departments are responsible for developing their organization’s social media strategy, 7 out of 10 identified marketing but only 16 percent said IT and 12 percent said customer service. We think this suggests a two-fold problem. First, organizations “silo” social media in marketing departments to their own detriment. And two, as Avinash Kaushik, Google’s Analytics Evangelist has said, “Too many companies have not evolved from what I call ‘shout marketing’ — think TV, newspapers, magazine ads — to influence by initiating and participating in conversations with consumers.”¹¹

Consumer, Physician and Hospital Use of Social Media

Healthcare organizations have been slower to adopt social media than other business organizations. Although hospitals probably have higher adoption rates than other sectors of the healthcare economy, a close look at the hospital industry reveals significant heterogeneity in use (see Table 3 below). Large, urban, nonprofit/private, teaching hospitals and childrens' hospitals are the highest adopters.

Table 3. Social Media Use in U.S. Hospitals

Hospital Characteristics	Percentage of U.S. Hospitals that Use Social Media
Number of Beds	
6-69	15%
100-399	26%
>399	42%
Ownership Type	
Private, nonprofit	30%
Investor-owned, for profit	13%
Government, federal	24%
Government, nonfederal	13%
Teaching Status	
Major	58%
Minor	31%
Nonteaching	16%
Location	
Urban	27%
Rural	10%
Primarily Treats Children	
Yes	58%
No	19%

Source: Thaker, Nowacki, Mehta, Edwards, 2011¹²

The Pew Research Center conducted a U.S. population survey in the Fall of 2010 and found that only a small percent of consumers use social media to get healthcare information. Almost 60 percent of adults seek health information online, but only about 7 percent go to social network sites for health information. Most adults with a health issue seek information, care or support the old fashion way: from a health professional (70 percent), from friends and family (54 percent), and from others with the same health condition (20 percent).^{13, 14}

Social media use is somewhat higher among physicians than consumers. We do know that a much higher percentage of physicians use social media in their personal than their professional lives. Physicians in the latter group use social media to locate educational information and communicate with their peers. Physician interaction with patients using social media is less common, although physicians report that patients are increasingly initiating contact through these channels.

Social media offers an important set of tools to open communication between providers and consumers, often by going to where consumers are.

How Do U.S. Healthcare Organizations Use Social Media? Best Practice Examples

Table 4 below presents best practice examples from early adopters and leading edge organizations. All 14 healthcare business goals discussed earlier in Table 1 on page 2 are presented in the rows of this table. The second column in Table 4 describes how social media practices have been designed and implemented to advance each strategic healthcare business goal.

Table 4. Using Social Media to Accomplish Healthcare Goals

Healthcare Goal	Social Media Best Practice Examples
Marketing	<p>Kaiser Permanente has maintained an active presence on multiple commercial social network sites for several years, as has Mayo Clinic. In July 2011, Mayo launched its own “Online Health Community” which is a Facebook-like social media site open to all comers. Within a week, 1,000 people had joined. By late September there were over 7,000 members. Mayo encourages visitors to its website to upload their photo, watch health videos and stories from patients, meet and join a “community of members with a shared purpose,” and participate in or just listen to discussions and conversations on shared health interests. The first page of the website is inviting; it clearly and briefly states why visitors might want to become members: “the benefits of joining are to meet others with similar health interests, share stories, learn, find support, and hear about Mayo Clinic.”</p>
Workforce Recruitment	<p>“Social recruitment” is a popular use of social media in large corporations. Sodexo, for example, is a very large global company that has pioneered methods of using social media for workforce recruiting and talent acquisition. Recruiting at the management level and above for hospitals is a main staple of its business. Sodexo uses social recruiting to fill hospital positions in food services management, facilities management and environmental services. The company also uses social recruiting to find and attract registered dieticians to hospitals (their largest employer second only to the federal government). Sodexo was recognized with an excellence award for innovative use of social media in 2009 and the company was named recruiting department of the year in 2010. Its social media strategies reduced annual recruitment advertising costs by \$300,000.</p>
Brand Management	<p>Children’s Hospital Boston uses social media channels to promote its services and help maintain its reputation as a national leader in pediatric care. Children’s uses Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to demonstrate its focus on patients and their families by sharing patients’ stories and weekly photos. The hospital also maintains a pediatric healthcare blog, called “Thriving,” where clinicians and staff write about various timely health news topics and address questions that are highly relevant to patients and their families. Because “Thriving” is a blog, others can respond and communicate with each other, taking the discussion in sometimes unpredictable directions.</p>

Table 4 continues

Table 4 continued

Healthcare Goal	Social Media Best Practice Examples
<p>Reputation Management</p> <p>Customer Relations</p>	<p>Because social media is Internet-based, it is relatively easy to listen to when and where your organization is mentioned, review the content, and research the case if it is merited, you have the opportunity to respond proactively and productively. In some cases, it establishes a motivation to invite offline discussion to provide a safe haven for exchange of personal health information, the option of offering a healthcare intervention, or “righting a wrong.” For example, consider how Cigna manages its reputation. Cigna staff monitors social media channels for comments about the organization. When negative comments are found, staff often respond by offering assistance in resolving the issue. Cigna customer experience officer Ingrid Lindberg believes this is a very important activity because negative comments can be influential. “At the end of the day, people do trust what friends or family tell them. With the advent of social media, everybody out there is one of my friends or family,” she said.¹⁵</p>
<p>Consumer, Patient, and Professional Education</p>	<p>Social media provide a new forum and new opportunities for sharing health knowledge with consumers, patients and health professionals. Many who have studied the cost and inefficiencies of the U.S. healthcare system have lamented how long it takes to “translate research into practice.” Variation in medical practice is well understood to be a major factor in high healthcare costs. The government has spent tens of millions of dollars to figure out how to translate and disseminate medical findings related to these concerns. Social media offer a new opportunity to communicate evidence-based health knowledge to consumers and patients and to disseminate evidence-based medicine to health professionals. The education possibilities inherent to the use of social media could breathe new life into the consumerism movement.</p> <p>Some healthcare organizations are using social media to educate consumers and patients. For example, a 10-doctor obstetrics and gynecology practice in Texas uses Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other platforms to share information with patients. One doctor in the practice says, “With Twitter, I can point my patients in the direction of articles and blog postings and things interesting from an OB/GYN perspective.”¹⁶ The doctor says that, as a result, his patients are better educated and come to appointments more prepared.</p>
<p>Professional Collaboration</p>	<p>Social media is helping to bring healthcare professionals together in learning, collaborative communities. A growing number of doctors use professional networking sites, such as Sermo, to converse and share information with colleagues near and far. Sermo was founded in 2006 and already has registered 125,000 community members (spanning nearly 70 specialties and 50 states). It is the largest online network of physicians in the U.S. Doctors use it to consult with colleagues about complicated cases, share new treatments, and discuss emerging research and other topics relevant to their profession. “Ideas for remote monitoring of patients,” “Dog bite won’t heal” and “Would you combine these meds?” are just a few of the topics currently discussed on Sermo. In addition, doctors can post photos of unusual clinical conditions and request feedback. For example, one member shared a photo of a patient’s diffuse arm rash and solicited diagnosis suggestions from his fellow Sermo members.</p>

Table 4 continues

Table 4 continued

Healthcare Goal	Social Media Best Practice Examples
Community Creation	<p>Online healthcare groups — virtual communities — are popping up with little if any regard to geographic or cost barriers thanks to such social media sites as Facebook and Twitter. In addition, an increasing number of health condition-specific sites have been created and are under development for the purpose of encouraging information sharing and, importantly, to provide a context for giving and getting support. Through networking sites such as PatientsLikeMe, Inspire and TuDiabetes, patients and caregivers form communities of people with like conditions, create profiles to document details of their health condition, review others' profiles, share advice on treatments and provide motivational support. A great attraction of such social media sites is that people experiencing similar hardships and tribulations can find each other with an ease never before dreamt possible. Even patients with the rarest of diseases can find others like them. (Consider that an individual with a disease that affects one in a million people can potentially locate 312 others like them in the U.S. alone.)</p>
Wellness	<p>Health plans and large employers have used social media effectively to promote wellness and healthy lifestyles among enrollees and employees. Aetna, for example, launched a “Healthy Food Fight” challenge and cook-off in 2010 to promote better nutrition and healthy cooking. The health plan uses Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to help publicize events. It also reaches out to college-age members using social media to provide information about alcohol use, physical fitness, sexual health and smoking cessation. Other health plans use Facebook and Twitter to encourage members to use such tools as health calculators, learning modules and quizzes to assess their health risks. Anthem’s Facebook page provides members a tool to calculate their “health footprint” and provides tips on how to grow it.</p>
Population and Patient Monitoring	<p>Social media sites can be used to collect patient-reported data for monitoring individuals and populations with chronic conditions. Researchers at Children’s Hospital Boston collected hemoglobin A1c data from members of the diabetes community TuDiabetes.¹⁷ They conducted a privacy-secured “data donation drive” and obtained information from over 1,000 voluntary participants. Even though the volunteers were not randomly selected from TuDiabetes members, the results mirrored those in a national CDC survey, leading the researchers to conclude that social networks may be an “efficient platform” for collecting data for disease surveillance.</p> <p>Social media can also be integrated with telemonitoring devices that patients keep at home. The results from using home glucose monitoring tests, blood pressure cuffs, weight scales and other devices can be broadcast and discussed, securely, to healthcare teams, family members and/or informal care providers via a social media site.</p>

Table 4 continues

Table 4 continued

Healthcare Goal	Social Media Best Practice Examples
Care Management Care Coordination	<p>Compared to its other uses, social media has probably been used the least in helping to achieve either of these important healthcare goals. Perhaps this is because, more than any other goals, social media must be integrated with other complex strategies — including technology, organizational change and new reimbursement systems — to create an impact. Still, there are some simpler but important ways social media has been used to manage care. Consider this example from the University of Iowa Children’s Hospital. The hospital used the popularity of Facebook to address a growing problem of medication adherence among teenage kidney transplant patients. Using data taken from the hospital’s electronic health record system, a mobile application (app) was populated with information on patients’ medications and dosage instructions. When a patient logs on to the site their medication data appears on their personal (not publically accessible) Facebook page to help them remember what drugs they need to take that day.</p> <p>Some health plans and self-insured employers are beginning to experiment with ways to use protected individual information shared via social media to aid in patient care coordination. In particular, efforts are underway to create secure online communities to bring payers, providers, pharmacists and informal family caregivers together around the care of an individual patient. This use is at an early stage but is an important area where social media may demonstrate value in the future by providing a technology “hand up” for organizations that wish to engage multiple care providers, patients and patients’ caregivers around an episode of care.</p>
Clinical Trial Recruitment	<p>Social media can be used to aid in soliciting volunteers for clinical trials. For instance, Novartis partnered with PatientsLikeMe in 2008 to recruit participants for a multiple-sclerosis drug clinical trial. The site sent messages to 8,000 members of the multiple sclerosis community to inform them of the trial, which led to 1,500 web hits on the Novartis site and an increase in study registrations.</p>
Surveillance, Analysis, Product Development	<p>Information shared via social media sites can provide life science organizations and other healthcare stakeholders with useful information for product development. Discussions occurring on sites provide insight into disease progression, how medications and devices are used, their effectiveness, their side effects, and unmet patient needs. This information is analyzed to inform the development of next generation healthcare products.</p> <p>In this application of social media, life science organizations and other stakeholders can benefit from listening to a community of patients discuss the disease they have in common, the treatments they receive and their reactions to medications. Stakeholder organizations have, on several occasions, successfully leveraged the power of social media to create communities and have offered, in return, to sponsor the cost of maintaining the community or the operating costs of the community organizer. In this way, stakeholder organizations may benefit from listening to patient/customer experience and patients may benefit from the products stakeholders subsequently develop.</p>

Table 4 continues

Table 4 continued

Healthcare Goal	Social Media Best Practice Examples
Surveillance, Analysis, Product Development (continued)	In 2010, biopharmaceutical company UCB sponsored the establishment of an epilepsy community on the PatientsLikeMe social media site. There, members of the community are encouraged to share information on their symptoms and treatments, as well as daily progress in controlling seizures and meeting treatment goals. They also have the option of completing quality of life surveys on topics such as the status of their cognitive, physical and social functionality, and can document and report adverse events associated with UCB treatments. According to UCB Executive Vice-President and Chief Medical Officer Iris Loew-Friedrich, “We believe this community will be a source of information that will allow us to better understand people living with epilepsy and may help us design clinical programs that incorporate real-world patient needs and experiences in a measurable way.” ¹⁸

Source: Global Institute for Emerging Healthcare Practices, CSC, 2011

Social Media Risks

We have discussed many ways social media can benefit organizations. However, there are risks involved as well. Organizations using social media face losing control of their message. Once a comment or “tweet” is posted, anyone can respond. While some users may share positive feedback, the door is also open to negative comments, which, however unfounded, can taint an organization’s reputation. In addition, social media can expose organizations to privacy, security and ethics breaches, even if the organization does not have a formal social media presence. Clinicians and staff may inappropriately share confidential information about patients and the organization. Sharing protected health information violates HIPAA and can have serious ramifications for the individual as well as the organization. Social media also raises new ethical questions about patient/provider relationships. Both patients and providers navigate social media channels; interactions on these sites are blurring traditional boundaries. Some fear this could negatively impact patient care by impairing providers’ professional judgment. Some providers also fear that interactions with patients on social media sites could expose them to malpractice lawsuits if their comments are misinterpreted.

Establish Social Media Use Policies

Taken together, these factors may give pause to anyone seriously considering a social media launch. However, precautions can be taken to mitigate risks. Establishing policies to govern employees’ use of social media is a critical step that organizations must take to protect themselves. Aetna, the American Medical Association, Kaiser Permanente, Mayo Clinic and Pfizer are some of the organizations that have already crafted policies. Minimally, an effective social media policy should reiterate that employees must adhere to legal requirements, federal regulations, and corporate policies and procedures in their social media use and that patient privacy and confidentiality standards apply in all settings, including the Internet. Policies should clarify what information can and cannot be published on social media sites, and encourage individuals to keep the content of postings professional and respectful of colleagues and patients. Kaiser Permanente has established a social media policy which may serve as a useful guide for others to consult in crafting their own policy. The document is clearly written, specific and provides readers with best practice examples.¹⁹

Posting public disclaimers can also be useful to ensure that users do not construe information taken from a social media site as medical advice, that the information users share on the organization’s sites will be publicly available

and may be used for marketing purposes, and that the organization reserves the right to oversee and monitor user activity. For instance, Children's Hospital warmly invites visitors to join discussions, but also warns that, among other things, offensive comments will be removed. Their disclaimer is presented in both legal terms and "plain English" for easy comprehension.²⁰ Lastly, provider organizations may also wish to direct users to call 911 rather than seek assistance through social media pages in the event of a medical emergency.

Recommendations

1. **You cannot afford to take a "wait-and-see approach."** Although some believe social media is a passing fad, we believe it is here to stay and the sooner your organization develops an active presence, the less distance you will have to make up later.
2. **You should have a social media policy, minimally, to protect against security, privacy or ethics breaches by your employees or customers. You should also offer staff education.** Training and outreach are necessary to ensure that staff fully comprehend and are able to carry out the policy.
3. **Use social media to go where your customers are. Listen to what others are saying about your organization, your product(s) and your brand(s).** Monitor the social media activities of others in your market, and use social media to listen to what others are saying about your competition.
4. **Consider starting where many organizations start: use social media to enhance marketing, branding, recruitment, reputation management and customer relations.**
5. **You do not have to develop a full blown social media strategy now, but eventually you will need one. Start now but start small and monitor outcomes.** Ask what your organization should be doing now to anticipate a more widespread use of social media to help accomplish key healthcare goals. Then expand your social media activities into new areas of value.
6. **Recruit social media managers internally. Distribute responsibilities among staff who know your organization, are Internet-savvy and are excited about using social media to benefit your organization. Keep social media content accurate and current.**

Summary

Social media is here. Healthcare organizations are using it as an important tool to connect consumers and providers. Early adopters show through numerous examples that social media can be used to influence customers and accomplish strategic business goals. Your organization needs both a social media policy and a social media strategy. You cannot afford to take a "wait-and-see" approach or to sit idly by while the social media revolution overtakes the information revolution and radically changes the way we communicate and accomplish healthcare goals.

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