

COVER  
STORY


# SOCIAL MEDIA

Presents Opportunities &  
Unique Challenges for Health  
Care Providers

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**SOCIAL MEDIA HAS BECOME A STAPLE IN NETWORKING, MARKETING, AND CUSTOMER RELATIONS ACROSS ALL INDUSTRIES – AND ITS GROWING PROMINENCE IN THE HEALTH CARE SECTOR IS NO EXCEPTION**

According to a 2011 study by QuantiaMD, physicians are becoming increasingly active on online networks and social media. In fact, nearly 90 percent of physicians use at least one social networking site personally, and 67 percent use social media for professional purposes. According to the QuantiaMD study, 28 percent of those using online networks professionally are active on two or more online networks. Platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, Twitter, Google+, and sites specifically for physicians like Sermo and Practice Fusion provide a readily accessible and instantaneous communications platform. They give colleagues, patients, community partners and the public a way to stay connected, ask questions and give feedback. While that presents a wonderful opportunity to engage and build awareness, health care practitioners and organizations face some

undeniable challenges as well when incorporating social media into their professional development, marketing, and patient relations activities.

### Social Media Challenges Facing Health Care Providers

According to Lancaster County-based social media strategist Rachel Strella of Strella Social Media, among the hurdles that stand in the way of medical practitioners and practices launching and effectively managing a social media presence are those common to all individuals and businesses – and those unique to the health care industry.

#### Universal challenges

- Not familiar with using online social tools
- No time to keep social media posts up to date

- Uncertainty about what to share on social media
- Uncertainty about which social media platform(s) will be most effective and offer the best return on investment

#### Health care field-specific challenges

- Fear of violating HIPPA laws and endangering patient protection
- Fear of posting information that could be misinterpreted as “medical advice”
- Vague rules surrounding what can or cannot be posted on social media in a regulated industry

To help practitioners navigate the health care-specific challenges, in May 2012, the FSMB (Federation of State Medical Boards) issued guidelines to help state medical boards offer social media training to their licensees. The

“Model Policy Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Social Media and Social Networking in Medical Practice” directs physicians on using social media professionally and responsibly so patients’ privacy and confidentiality is protected. In addition, it discusses maintaining proper boundaries—within the context of online interactions—within the physician-patient relationship.

“To ensure a proper physician-patient relationship, there should be parity of ethical and professional standards applied to all aspects of a physician’s practice, including online interactions through social media and social networking sites,” advises the FSMB guide.

PAMED (Pennsylvania Medical Society) also shares some guidelines for using social media in its 2012 Managing Risk newsletter “Risks Associated with Curbside Consultation.”

- “Do not assume that what you or others post online is anonymous, cannot be accessed by attorneys, or is in compliance with HIPAA or state privacy rules.”
- “View the advice gathered from a social networking site as a resource, not a consultation. Even when a site is touted as “physician only,” you have to consider the credentials of the person with whom you are exchanging information.”
- “Take advantage of the website’s tools to receive information only from trusted colleagues. Anytime you make treatment decisions using information gained through social networking, the weight given to the information should be comparable to information you could have obtained from other sources, such as journal articles.”

So, how can health care providers use social media networks without fear of

breaching HIPAA or in some other way violating industry regulations?

### Some suggestions for engaging with an audience without putting yourself at risk include:

- Announcing new certifications, credentials and affiliations
- Highlighting new services or areas of expertise
- Introducing new staff members
- Posting changes to your office hours
- Promoting wellness events and new programs
- Raising awareness of fundraisers
- Linking to information about new technology

Another challenge facing health care providers is choosing the “right” social media network. Strella advises that physicians and organizations examine what they want to accomplish and consider how their target audience uses social media.

“For example, if you’re a physical therapist with a primary goal of communicating valuable tips to your existing patients, I might recommend considering Facebook and an e-newsletter or blog,” explains Strella. “A doctor or specialist may have a goal to connect with like-minded professionals who can help expand his or her knowledge base. In that case, perhaps a medical group on LinkedIn would be effective.”

She also shares that physicians and practices should remember that succeeding on social media requires consistency. It demands ongoing effort to develop and curate content and to perform the tasks of posting, monitoring for responses, and replying to comments and messages. That means setting time aside each week to execute social media responsibilities or out-source the work to someone who can help manage them.

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## Tips for Effective Use of Social Media in Health Care

1

Discover which channels your colleagues and patients are most active on, and create, and maintain an active presence

2

Embrace tools that play to your strengths. For example, if you’re an accomplished speaker, YouTube videos could showcase your knowledge and personality. Likewise, if you’re a strong writer, a blog might be your best outlet

3

Create content that provides value to your audience. To them, it should be relevant, interesting and build trust

4

Check and monitor your online reputation by setting up social mentions, Google alerts, and similar tracking tools

### Tips to physicians on separating their personal and work lives on electronic media

*(from “Online Medical Professionalism: Patient & Public Relationships”)*

1

Do not “friend” patients through social media

2

Maintain strict privacy settings on personal social media accounts

3

Always remain aware that anything posted online can be shared with a larger audience than originally intended—and could be taken out of context by readers

4

Do not provide medical advice via email unless a patient-physician relationship has already been established

While that might sound daunting, Strella says physicians shouldn't be dissuaded from participating in social media. They have the knowledge and expertise to offer value-added information to their followers – they just have to find their rhythm for communicating that expertise via the social channels available to them.

### The Opportunities that Social Media Present to the Health Care Professional

Though physicians need to be more careful and calculating when using social media than do professionals in most other industries, they can derive substantial benefits from maintaining an active online presence.

*According to data gathered by Geonetric, a company that provides online solutions to health care organizations, out of the 80 percent of internet users who look online for health information, 44 percent go online to look for doctors.*

Practitioners and practices with a strong, active online presence naturally stand a better chance of being found by those searching for services and specialties online. A study conducted by Social Media Examiner in 2011 reports that 45 percent of professionals who had invested 12 months or less in social media said they gained new partnerships as a direct result of their online activities. We might also assume that the experience of those engaged in social media marketing in health care correlates with that of professionals in other industries where 88 percent increased awareness of their businesses by using social media.

Strella notes that social media networks present an especially promising opportunity to practitioners who work with a younger, tech-savvy demographic. Don't discount their effectiveness in reaching a more seasoned audience

though; adults from the ages of 35 to 54 are one of the fastest growing groups using the major social media channels.

### Local Social Media Success Stories

Lancaster County-based physicians, practices and hospitals are seeing benefits from their involvement in social media.

Bill Weik, CEO of Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster (OAL), shares that he and his marketing manager launched a Facebook page approximately five months ago to stay top of mind with the patients they serve in the local sports population.

"Facebook is how that group communicates," explains Weik. "It's where they go for information."

According to Weik, OAL updates its page at least once weekly to maintain a consistent presence and hold followers' interest. He has been pleasantly surprised by the amount of interaction they've gotten through the page in the way of testimonials and inquiries about services. OAL is also registered on Foursquare which adds an element of fun for those visiting physical therapy locations as they interact and compete for the most "check-ins."

In addition to OAL's social media, Weik uses LinkedIn for his own personal professional purposes. He has found value in participating in professional LinkedIn groups where group members share information on topics relevant to his industry. LinkedIn has also provided him a way to stay connected and communicate with colleagues who he doesn't regularly have an opportunity to talk with or see face to face.

According to Director of Community Relations Joanne Eshelman, Ephrata Community Hospital began using social media in 2010 with a Twitter feed, and added a Facebook page in 2011.

"Today, we've made a conscious effort to use both Twitter and Facebook as a daily part of all marketing and community relations initiatives. It is just one more way to reach our customers where they are, and increasingly they are online whether at home, at work and on the go," she explains. Eshelman shares that whenever they make a Facebook post or Tweet about their photo gallery, they get a lot of interest from their "fans." Social media has proven to be an effective tool in fundraising, too.

"We also received great support for a recent fundraising event that was heavily promoted through social media."

ECH has also seen increased interest from local media as a result of its social media activity. Within just the week prior to our interview with Eshelman, she was contacted by two reporters who learned about new Ephrata Community Hospital services through the hospital's Twitter feed.

So for administrators, physicians, and health care organizations, social media provides many opportunities and much potential. The key is to engage within the unique rules and regulations of the industry while taking advantage of these relatively new and always-evolving communications channels. ■

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