



WHITE PAPER

Health Care and Social Media

5 Key Trends to Prepare For Success

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In a recent global study, IMS Health, one of the world's largest sources of information for the health care industry, made a surprising finding about social media and health care.

After analyzing the top global health care organizations and pharmaceutical manufacturers, they found that regulatory bodies such as the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Medicines Agency often outpace many private and public health organizations in terms of social media adoption.¹

As their research found, the FDA had a higher engagement score on the IMS Health Index than any pharmaceutical company. Likewise, the European Medicines Agency "operates its Twitter feed with one of the highest reach index scores, second only to the FDA" which goes to show that regulators clearly understand the "value of a strong social media presence," often innovating faster than the companies they are supposed to be regulating in terms of adoption and maturity of their strategies.

While pharma has lagged behind in terms of social media adoption, hospitals and health care providers have been quicker to test the waters, creating many of the early best practices and strategic roadmaps. A survey of physicians found that over 50% of practices responding used Facebook as a platform.¹ 87% of those physicians under the age of 55 used some form of social media. While the FDA's social media guidelines were widely criticized for not providing enough actual specific frameworks for engagement, it's clear that government and regulatory bodies are actively encouraging health care providers and pharma to increase their use social media to improve patient support and engagement.

Early leaders such as Spectrum Health, The Mayo Clinic Center of Innovation, Detroit Medical Center, MedStar Health, as well as pharma organizations such as Johnson

& Johnson, Nordisk, Boehringer Ingelheim, and UCB are showing that social media offers many opportunities. These opportunities include using data to better understand patients, reputation management, and supporting the patient with relevant health information throughout their customer lifecycle.

Key global social media opportunities identified by IMS Health

Online discovery - attract new patients by educating them as they search for health information online. Patients are also looking to connect with peers who experienced similar health issues, so share patient stories, experiences, and offer online support.

Patient engagement and support - social media offers an excellent channel for "pastoral support." With online forums and communities, patient support and engagement can be offered very efficiently and at scale.

Patient loyalty - social media can help organizations improve the quality of their customer service, discover new areas to improve, and gain qualitative feedback on new initiatives. This can drive increased loyalty and increase patient referrals.

[Source: IMS Health](#)

Key global social media opportunities identified by IMS Health (continued)

Stay top of mind with education - patients are searching online for medical information throughout their patient journey. Doctors and health care professionals have a huge advantage over most sources online (such as consumer forums and Wikipedia) and can build positive brand equity by providing accurate and authoritative answers. From YouTube channels to podcasts to topic-based health communities, information is the new brand currency.

Listening and measurement - monitor social conversations to better understand unmet needs of patients, gather insights about the patient experience, track the impact of social media activity on website traffic and new patient inquiries, and monitor your brand's share of voice in relation to competitors.

[Source: IMS Health](#)

If your organization is ready to progress beyond the basic tactics such as maintaining a Facebook page and pushing brand content outwards on social channels, this white paper will help your organization prioritize the new opportunities shaping the future of health care.

#1 Best practices from the frontline

Social media presents a lot of complexity, especially since its adoption in health care has been relatively slow. Unlike socially mature industries such as retail, B2B software, and entertainment, health care doesn't have a large library of best practices to draw from.

So where should large organizations begin?

The leaders in health care driving new tactics and turning experimentation into best practices are actually mid-sized organizations such as large hospitals, medical software companies, and smaller pharmaceutical companies. These companies are typically competing with larger players and so have turned to social media as a way to differentiate their services and products. In their research, IMS Health found that

"mid-sized organizations, including Novo Nordisk, Boehringer Ingelheim and UCB, are utilizing social media as effectively, or more effectively, than the largest pharmaceutical manufacturers."

For large organizations looking to learn from early success in social media and health care, mid-sized companies offer many best practices. These companies have completed a lot of initial groundwork, built best practices, and created strategic roadmaps that large organizations can follow.

#2 The changing patient journey

Most doctors and health care professionals accept that the traditional relationship between health experts and consumers has changed. Digital media has transformed the idea of medical expertise, transferring it from a single authoritative source into a wide network of sites, blogs, videos, and on-demand information sources. Ten years ago, health care organizations could still primarily push information outwards, educating patients in advance of symptoms they might encounter and where to turn once they identified the early signs of disease.

The online patient journey

- 35% of adults say that at one time or another they have gone online specifically to try to figure out what medical condition they or someone else might have.
- 26% say they read or watched someone else's experience about health or medical issues in the last 12 months.
- 16% of internet users say they went online in the last year to find others who might share the same health concerns.

[Source: Pew Research Center](#)

Now, online research is a critical part for the patient journey. Like it or not, the patient-doctor relationship has changed and patients are often beginning their research before speaking to doctors.

According to IMS Health, younger patients usually Google their symptoms first and then seek out a doctor; older patients tend to seek out medical information from doctors first and then complete their research online. So the changing nature of how patients educate themselves is affecting both young and senior populations, even if their discovery phases of information collecting differ.

Pew Research Center, a non-partisan research organization, examined how patients in the U.S. research medical concerns. While 70% of adults got information, care, or support offline from a doctor or other health care professional, 59% of adults also used social media and search engines to complement their patient journeys.

This journey is becoming increasingly social too. Patients are searching for stories about disease and health experiences, often looking for social interactions to help them navigate through their health concerns. This includes consulting online reviews or rankings of health care services and treatments (30%) and reading or watching content that documents other patient experiences (26%).

Peer-to-peer health care

- Among online health information seekers, 16% in the past year tried to find others who might share the same health concerns.
- 30% of internet users have consulted online reviews or rankings of health care services or treatments.
- 26% of internet users have read or watched someone else's experience about health or medical issues in the past year.

[Source: Pew Research Center](#)

Another interesting aspect of this trend is that Wikipedia is the most important source of information for rarer diseases. The reason being is that rarer diseases have much less information available online. It's important to remember that searchers would prefer authoritative sources. Doctors and subject matter experts have a lot to gain by widely sharing their expertise.

ISM Health showed in their quantitative analysis how web traffic to Wikipedia could be used as an opportunity to reach new health audiences:

"Rarer diseases, which often have fewer available information sources and are less understood by patients and clinicians, show a higher frequency of visits than many more common diseases. In an assessment of 50 major disease-specific Wikipedia articles, the Institute found a strong correlation between page views and medicine use, with online information-gathering occurring throughout the patient journey."¹

The takeaway is to use social channels and content marketing to ensure that your organization is there at the beginning of the patient journey. These initiatives need to account for the new ways that patients collect health information, accepting that patients are now more active in their own journey and will supplement offline guidance (from doctors) with online activity. This is particularly important for clinics who differentiate their services based on specialization, as there is a tremendous reward for owning the search terms and social visibility around specific topic clusters.

For local clinics, you can geo-target information (such as localizing content for different cities and geo-targeting social media updates through your Social Relationship Platform) so that your content reaches your specific target audience.

As Steve Rubel, Chief Content Strategist for Edelman PR, put it at a recent Connect via Hootsuite conference "be a student of how people consume information. Understand the behaviors and how people find you. Analyze where they are coming in through social media, search or going direct."

#3 The incredible asset of trust

Google has teams of engineers trying to figure out how to push authoritative content up in the search results and push thinly written articles and amateur content down. If you are credible and offer specialized knowledge, the internet and social channels are yours to own.

A recent survey conducted by Pricewaterhouse Cooper asked patients how likely they were to trust health information posted online through social media. The results showed that consumers are more likely to trust social media posts and activity by doctors (60%) over any other group. This is followed by nurses (56%), and hospitals (55%).²

Health care professionals and institutions are highly respected for their expertise on search and social media channels, which offers an excellent opportunity to build your organization's brand and reputation through content and education. Consider that The Mayo Clinic's podcast listeners rose by 76,000 after the clinic started using social media.³

Most organizations use PR to boost the credibility of their experts and keep clinics and products top of mind for customers, yet self-publishing is overlooked. For example, TV has produced a line-up of globally known medical experts such as Doctor Oz. While many clinics and health care companies court traditional media outlets to build their authority as experts, in five years it will be obvious that they overlooked one of the most important innovations to hit media since the turn of the century: YouTube.

YouTube and other video streaming platforms offer an incredible channel for hospitals as it allows them to highlight the value of their facilities, share expert interviews, create patient stories, and deliver valuable education that patients are actively looking for.

Search data from Google shows YouTube traffic to hospital sites has increased 119% year-over-year. Overall, health organizations should be moving beyond curating content and posting press releases to social media channels. They should capitalize on education-ready channels such as podcasts and YouTube, helping to add a human face to their brand.³

#4 Social spam and the new role of IT

"Cyber criminals have come to appreciate that sensitive personal and organisational information are the currency of their hacker economy," said Vincent Weafer, senior vice president of McAfee Labs in a recent report on the rise of spam and phishing attempts in social media.⁴

With the right technology and policies in place, you can secure your organization's social profiles, safeguard your brand and keep regulators happy. Look for a Social Relationship Platform that offers centralized control of corporate social accounts—these are strategic assets and should be secured as such. Retain ownership of them at all times, especially during personnel changes.

The rise of social spam

- 15% of all social spam contains a URL, often to spammy content, pornography or malware.
- 20% of all spam infected apps are found on a brand-owned social media account.
- Facebook contains the highest number of phishing attacks and personally identifiable information—more than 4 times the other social media networks.
- 1 in 200 social media messages contain spam, including lures to adult content and malware.

[Source: Nexgate](#)

Social Relationship Platforms also ensure that all communication via your organization's social channels comply to HIPAA regulation. The solution reduces the time and work required for approval workflows, as well as scans and removes non-compliant content. This allows your departments to engage customers on social channels, while remaining compliant with regulatory requirements.

Social Relationship Platforms also reduce the work and concern caused by increasing rates of social spam. Nexgate, a global leader in providing cloud-based brand protection and compliance for enterprise social media accounts, examined over 60 million pieces of unique content from 25 million social accounts, including the top five trafficked accounts for Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, and LinkedIn. They found that 15% of all social spam contains a URL, often to spammy content, pornography or malware (a vector for phishing private patient information).

To capitalize on social opportunities without exposing data or opening your brand to being hacked, it's important to elevate the role of IT in executing and securing social media initiatives. The right Social Relationship Platform can detect malware both in content your accounts are about to publish and already existing content on branded accounts.

#5 Empowered organizations win

"Customers aren't the only ones who represent disruption," explains the Altimeter Group in their latest report on The State of Digital Transformation. "Employees are also at the heart of change."⁵

From increasing the visibility of charity and fundraising events to sharing brand content out among professional networks, health organizations have a vast resource of employee talent and expertise to draw upon.

To capitalize on this trend, organizations need to ensure that education is provided to employees and that social media governance is well understood. Think about how well your organization is educating its practitioners and other employees in the correct use of social media.

If your training program is in need of improvement, start small by working with your existing social teams to find out which on-boarding, coaching and monitoring practices work—and which don't.

Your digital leadership can foster sharing of best practices and begin educating practitioners in other departments or regions. Hootsuite, for example, develops custom education and training programs for different organizations and industries. Professional certification programs such as [Hootsuite University](#) can help your organization quickly catch-up to social media trends and scale activities across teams, departments, and regions.

Looking Forward

While more guidance is needed from regulatory bodies such as the FDA, HIPAA, IFPMA, and the EMA, there's an understanding among most industry leaders of the value of a social media presence. If you put a strong foundation in place—which includes security, compliance, education-first engagement, and employee advocacy—your health care organization will be able to confidently engage with customers and scale up investment.

Endnotes

1. IMS Health [Pharma Should Make Better Use of Social Media To Engage Patients and Improve the Use of Medicines](#), 2014
2. Digital Trends, [The doctor will see you now: How the Internet and social media are changing healthcare](#), 2013
3. Referral MD [24 Outstanding Statistics & Figures on How Social Media has Impacted the Health Care Industry](#), 2014
4. McAfee, [McAfee Threats Report: First Quarter](#), 2013
5. Nexgate, [The State of Digital Transformation](#), 2014

About Hootsuite Enterprise

Partner with Hootsuite to accelerate your social transformation



Hootsuite Enterprise empowers organizations to execute business strategies for the social media era. As the world's most widely used social relationship platform, Hootsuite Enterprise enables global businesses to scale social media activities across multiple teams, departments, and business units. Our versatile platform supports a thriving ecosystem of technology integrations, allowing businesses to extend social media into existing systems and programs.

We help organizations create deeper relationships with customers and draw meaningful insights from social media data. Innovating since day one, we continue to help businesses pioneer the social media landscape and accelerate their success through education and professional services.

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