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Click, like, retweet: healthcare reputation online

Making social media work for your organisation

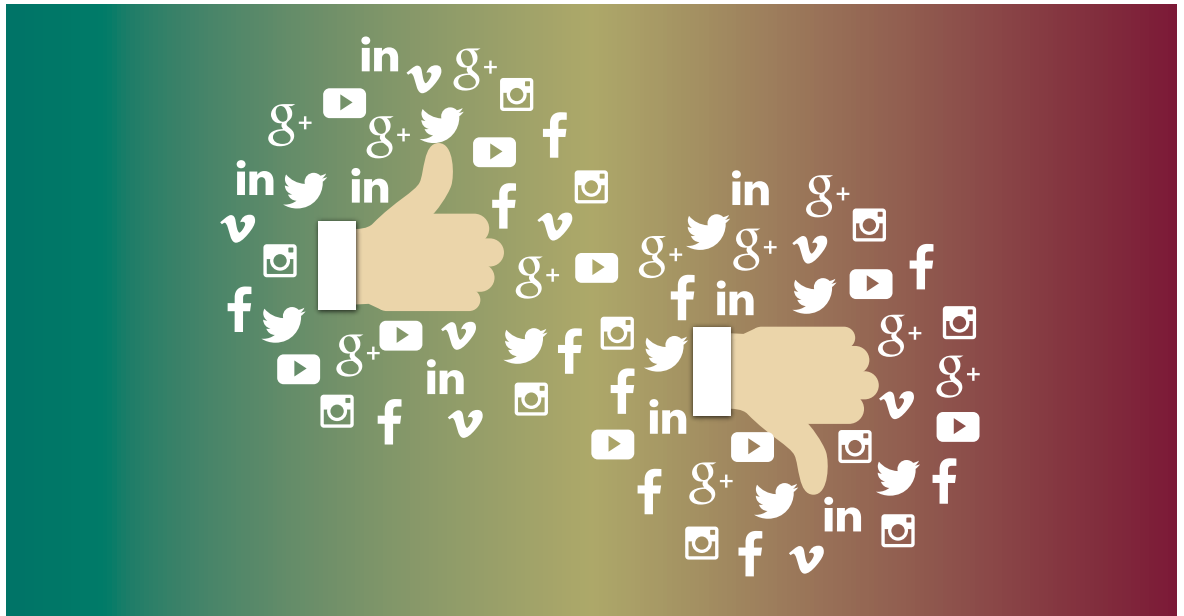
Leading healthcare social media expert gives rundown on how online presence should not be left to chance.



Marie Ennis-O'Connor
Founder - Health Care
Social Media, Ireland

ennisoconn@gmail.com
@JBBC

hcsmonitor.com



Social media has an increasingly important role to play in maintaining an organisation's reputation and image. Not only are patients seeking health information online, many say their choice of a specific doctor, hospital or medical treatment is influenced by social media. Patients are also using social media to vocalise how they feel about their doctors, drugs, treatment plans, insurance, and medical devices. Don't think if you are not on social media, patients aren't discussing your organisation. You can't opt out of reputation management - whether you have a social media presence or not, a patient who has a bad experience with your organisation is only one tweet or Facebook post away from sharing it with the world.

It is far better to take control of your reputation by responding to these conversations yourself and

correcting any misinformation or misperceptions. Responding in real time strengthens public perception that your focus is firmly on patient satisfaction. Remember that everything you do online - every blog post, every tweet, every conversation - is a reflection of your brand. A successful social media presence hinges on the trust between you and your followers. Becoming a trusted source of health information for your patients and proactively developing a strong, consistent, and credible image online will increase patient trust and confidence in your organisation.

Trends in healthcare social media marketing

There are many exciting trends on the horizon; for the sake of brevity, I'll focus on just three of them. Firstly, Chatbots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) will play a much

bigger role in automated marketing, much of it via social media. Secondly, the way people search for information online is changing. Increasingly, people are using voice search on their smartphones, tablets or voice assistants to search for information on the Internet. It is predicted by 2020, 50 percent of all searches will likely be voice searches, so marketers will need to start optimising their content for voice search. Thirdly, we've been hearing a lot about the importance of video marketing and this trend will continue to grow in importance. By 2020, Cisco predicts that video will make up 80 percent of the content we consume online.

As an extension of this, live video streaming is an important component of social media marketing. People are spending three times longer watching live content than pre-recorded videos. Marketing is now less about pre-produced, scripted videos, and more about delivering an authentic experience that people can connect with. Healthcare organisations should leverage the power of live video to communicate their story and build relationships with their patients.

Not only is social media marketing and healthcare a natural fit, it's a necessary one. More people use social media than ever and this spans all age demographics. As the Internet increasingly becomes the medium of choice for researching health information, social media has become an important channel for attracting new patients and improving the patient experience. 80 percent of internet users search for health information, and 40 percent of those are looking for a specific doctor or healthcare professional. And with a generation of millennials who are more likely to seek initial medical advice from the Internet, it follows that the best way to reach patients is to meet them on their online journey. It's crucial that healthcare organisations evolve their practices to meet this growing demand.

Putting time and effort into using social media makes sense in light of these facts, and yet many healthcare organisations are still hesitant to embrace social media. There are several reasons for this, including failure to see the value of social media, concerns about the risk to patient privacy, and perceived lack of time to create content and maintain a social media presence. While I understand these objections, I point to the many healthcare organisations that have successfully integrated social media into their marketing channels, while still maintaining patient and data privacy. And when it comes to finding time for social media, there are many time-saving tips, tools, and strategies which I teach clients to help them manage their time better.

Action plan

The one thing I see time and again is that organisations jump on board with social media without a plan. They have no clear idea why they are using social media, beyond the reasoning that "everyone is on social media" so they should be too. They don't really know who their audience is, so they may be on the wrong social media platform to reach them. And if they haven't researched their audience, how will they know which kind of content to post which will be of most interest to their patients?

To make social media an effective means to reach patients you need to take a more strategic approach. When working with clients, the first thing I do is develop a solid social media plan to move their strategy in the right direction. I also advise clients to never forget that social media is a conversation – you need to listen and respond twice as much as you talk. Many organisations make the mistake of using social media as a one-way broadcasting channel. Organisations need to commit to listening, genuinely responding, and engaging with those people who take the time to interact with them online.

I'm excited when I see organisations who are creative in their use of social media. A recent campaign which stands out for me is "Know Your Lemons". Through an eye-catching and highly visual graphic Worldwide Breast Cancer delivered critical information about lesser-known warning signs of breast cancer. Movember is another stand-out campaign which encourages men to grow moustaches in the month of November to raise awareness of men's health issues. It started in Australia and New Zealand in 2004 and has since become a globally successful fundraising campaign.

Marketing mix

Realising social media's potential in healthcare requires an organisational culture that values social media as central to its overall strategy. Social media should be viewed not as an add-on, but as an essential component of healthcare marketing. Unlike traditional marketing practices that have stayed constant for decades, social media is still a relatively new marketing channel with new networks, updates, and features constantly emerging. Marketing departments need to invest more of their budget in platforms and resources that takes full advantage of the opportunities presented by social media.

Both traditional and digital marketing should draw on each other's strengths and complement each other. Social media creates direct communication with an audience in a way that traditional marketing cannot do.

Where social media can be highly targeted and measurable, traditional marketing tends to throw information out there, and hope it sticks. The strength of traditional marketing is in its integrated, multi-channel approach, something that I see missing in many social media campaigns. Both traditional and digital marketing channels should be better aligned, for example using print or broadcast media with a call to action to an online initiative. Traditional marketing also tends to attract a larger budget, which digital third need to get better at claiming for their social media initiatives.

Winning strategy

Creating and maintaining your online reputation is a proactive effort. You build an online presence from the ground up. Start by optimising your website - think of it as your home-base to which you will be directing your social media followers to find relevant and engaging information. With more people accessing the Internet via mobile devices, make sure your site is optimised for mobile viewing. To increase the likelihood that your website will be placed at the top of Google search results, thereby earning you trust with your audience, consider adding a blog to your site. A blog serves to proactively show your patients that you are a trusted source of healthcare information.

Next, put a content promotion plan in place. In today's noisy social media world, you need to amplify your content to be heard. This can be done through a combination of paid promotion and organically through influencers and employees. Make it easy for people to share your site's content on social media by incorporating social share icons prominently throughout your website. Create lots of visual content such as infographics and videos and encourage people to share these on social media. Post updates about your hospital's accomplishments, showcasing ground-breaking surgeries, cutting-edge research, and the work of high-profile staff members. Cross promote each piece of content you create, but do not copy and paste the same post on each platform—format each of them to meet the requirements of the specific platforms. At the end of each week, take time to monitor and measure the impact of your social media activity. Monitor your engagement rates and pages views to see which channels get the most attention and measure the return on investment for paid ads and social media promotions.

Successful case studies

Mayo Clinic leads the way in their use of social media in healthcare marketing. By establishing the Mayo Clinic

Center for Social Media (MCSMN), Mayo has taken firm control of its digital reputation. MCSMN is a perfect example of a healthcare organisation getting executive buy-in on social media and putting its marketing budget towards cultivating a strong social media presence. Interacting on social media should always be about creating connections and building engagement. Mayo's Sharing Mayo Clinic blog is a good example of creating a digital platform for patients, families and Mayo Clinic staff to share their collective experience.

Social media's influence has still not reached its peak; it will continue to disrupt healthcare in ways we are only beginning to understand. It is equally important nowadays for healthcare organisations to communicate with patients online as it is through more traditional offline channels. Knowing how to leverage this opportunity is an essential skill for the modern healthcare organisation. I like to use a quote from Erik Qualman: "We do not have a choice on whether we do social media, the question is - how well we do it".

The best social media accounts are precisely targeted, updated frequently, and foster an ongoing dialogue with followers. That's why it's so important to have a plan in place at the outset and monitor, measure, and adjust your progress as you go. Social media is a journey, not a destination. The continually-evolving landscape challenges us to keep up with trends and be ever-more creative in capturing the attention of audiences - that's what I find to be equally the most challenging and exciting thing about social media. There are no shortcuts to success - social media won't work if you don't put the work in - but the rewards for those of us who do are hugely satisfying and I cannot imagine any marketing success without it. ■

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Social media channels are critical for developing and maintaining healthcare reputation
- ✓ Investment in social media is necessary but many healthcare organisations are reluctant to follow through owing to privacy concerns
- ✓ Numerous healthcare organisations make a success of social media marketing while managing patient privacy successfully
- ✓ The future holds huge development for social media engagement and therefore reputation leverage
- ✓ Devising a social media plan is crucial
- ✓ Top social media accounts have clear targets, frequent updates and engage with the community

