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Social media in healthcare

Opportunities and challenges

Tips and pointers from FutureLearn trainer on optimal use of social media for crisis management, patient engagement and preventive healthcare.



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How important is it that healthcare engages in social media practice? What about social media is most challenging for healthcare organisations?

In this era of information and communication technology, every sector is taking advantage of social media, and the healthcare sector is no exception. We not only obtain information via websites, but we also interact through various social media platforms. Any organisation, such as a hospital, that aims to be in the public domain, has to use social media. Healthcare has now become patient-centred which makes patient engagement and satisfaction a top priority, hence the need to implement a social media strategy. Hospitals need social media experts—a new emerging opportunity as well as a public relations department. Employing a social media expert has

become one of the necessities for many healthcare organisations.

In your FutureLearn training you cover health communication crises. How should a healthcare organisation approach crisis management with online tools? How does it differ from the approach with offline tools if at all?

In our FutureLearn course Social Media in Healthcare we look at how a hospital / healthcare organisation or healthcare authority would communicate with the mass population during the outbreak of diseases and disasters, for example SARS, Ebola, the common cold, an attack by biological warfare etc. Online tools can aid crisis management through patient engagement, education, empowerment and providing the right information, which can be carried out via social

media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and health-maps, to get information out instantly. This also enables health organisations to get the latest population insights, with regards to their own health concerns. Offline tools are more about direct implementation, treatment and other traditional strategies.

“ EMPLOYING OR HIRING A SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERT HAS BECOME ONE OF THE NECESSITIES FOR MANY HEALTHCARE ORGANISATIONS ”

Can social media enhance healthcare crisis management or be potentially damaging?

It's important to understand that social media has the potential to be both enhancing and damaging, during or after a crisis. There will be numerous rumours and misinformation spreading during a crisis, creating panic among the public, with the aim of making the information 'go viral.' Population education or empowerment is important to ensure that the general population doesn't fall victim to such rumours. Healthcare organisations have a duty to prevent damage in this way, by creating awareness. People should be educated to distinguish between trustworthy and misleading information. For example, we published an article on how misleading information on anorexia is promoted on YouTube, stating that "the illiterate in this ICT era will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot distinguish between trustworthy and misleading information available online" (Syed-Abdul et al. 2013).

What examples are there of healthcare organisations using online channels optimally (or poorly) in crisis management?

There are several healthcare organisations that use online channels during crisis management, such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the Healthcare Board etc. For example, the CDC through its Facebook page ([facebook.com/CDC](https://www.facebook.com/CDC)) gives real-time information on crisis management, as well as prevention of ongoing epidemics and communicable diseases such as during the Ebola virus, Zika virus and dengue outbreaks. The Healthcare Board also offers a platform for discussions on health and

healthcare transformation through its Facebook page.

However, poor use of online channels can lead to the population falling victim to misleading information. One such example and more information on the public health crisis during the Ebola outbreak is described by Basch et al., who looked at coverage on YouTube (Basch et al. 2015).

Your FutureLearn course covers Google trends, HealthMap, PatientsLikeMe, mobile apps, social-generated big data, research challenges and opportunities and gamification. How are these important for healthcare?

- Google trends are an essential tool to know about the insights of online search behaviour in relation to healthcare. Google is a first point of call for searching online for information for any purpose, and is free, reliable and widely used by the general public; this can be used to monitor public health concerns and disease outbreaks
- HealthMap ([healthmap.org](https://www.healthmap.org)) aids tracking and monitoring of real cases about a disease from all over the world. This information is useful to track ongoing trends and status of a disease and provides future insights to work on disease prevention
- PatientsLikeMe ([patientslikeme.com](https://www.patientslikeme.com)) is a platform where patients with similar diseases share their experiences and concerns, to eventually improve the understanding of their own disease
- Mobile apps are increasingly widely used, and are thus an important tool in healthcare for disease management, distraction, motivation and also communication with healthcare professionals
- With the wide use of mobile phones, social media networks and websites, social-media generated big data is becoming an important and valuable resource for researchers, to explore digital epidemiology and track the health status of population
- Gamification plays an important role in healthcare as it aids in distraction, engagement, motivation, as well as management in case of chronic diseases.

What are the top things that healthcare gets wrong when it comes to using social media channels?

In my understanding, 'wrong' here should be interpreted as being used inefficiently, because no healthcare organisation will spread incorrect information intentionally. The use of mobile phones has

penetrated every aspect of people's lives; therefore, I don't think social media channels should be used when information is not timely or not targeted at the whole population.

How about exceptional uses of social media for healthcare marketing?

Social media can be used efficiently in several ways as a means of healthcare marketing, using sponsored ads, sharing posts in groups or with targeted audiences at the right time. For instance, we are using sponsored ads on Facebook and Google to market our app on smoking cessation and have received a good response so far, leading to more app downloads.

“IT'S IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT SOCIAL MEDIA HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE BOTH ENHANCING AND DAMAGING, DURING OR AFTER A CRISIS”

What needs to change in a typical healthcare marketing department to keep up with social media opportunities?

Information shared on social media reaches millions of people at the click of a button. Therefore, social media should be used as much as possible. The efficiency of the information depends on the purpose of information, time and target audience. In my opinion, social media is undoubtedly more efficient than traditional tools such as radio, television, newspapers, etc. Public engagement, as well as awareness, is important, and can help enhance opportunities in social media.

How can traditional marketing models be incorporated into healthcare social media use?

Ensure you're reaching the right target audience with timely information, and make the information precise and easy to understand, which can be done more efficiently and more effectively by using social media.



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What mix of factors make the foundation for a good social media strategy and upgrade healthcare online presence?

Hospitals should be involved in social media, consistently and by posting persistently, to attract more patient followers. Regarding social media presence, awareness through various healthcare groups, stakeholders, marketing ads, pages, tweets, etc. can be used for promoting the hospital's activity.

If a healthcare organisation asks your advice on how to approach social media, what are your top three pointers?

1. Focus on preventive care: In the case of a healthcare organisation, I would suggest creating promotional activities to attract more of their target audience on social media. Awareness of digital health literacy is relevant here, as it relates to people's ability to find useful health information, difficulties faced by web users, and how to improve e-health literacy among citizens (Atique et al. 2016).
2. Focus on patient engagement and satisfaction.
3. Use social media for creating disease-focused groups. ■

Social Media in Healthcare: Opportunities and Challenges, is available on the FutureLearn social learning platform on 14th May 2018 - see <https://iii.hm/h62>

KEY POINTS



- ✓ Social media needs to reach the right target audience with timely information
- ✓ Information should be precise and easy to understand
- ✓ Social media should focus on preventive care, patient engagement and satisfaction and disease groups
- ✓ Social media has the potential to be both enhancing and damaging
- ✓ People should be educated to distinguish between trustworthy and misleading information available online