



Hospital Marketing and Communications Via Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media usage by health care organizations has increased dramatically. Findings from this research show that 95% of the top ranked hospitals use social media. The purpose of this study is to examine whether social media usage varies according to size of hospital and types of services provided. Since social media platforms appeal to different groups of people, this prompts the question of whether certain platforms are more appealing to people who partake in different health services. Findings reveal differences in social media usage depending on the services provided by a hospital.

KEYWORDS

social media; health care marketing; health care communications; services marketing; hospitals

Introduction

The popularity of social media has spurred a new era in physician–patient relationships, known as Health 2.0. Essentially, hospitals are engaging in Health 2.0 when they use social media to personalize health care and disseminate information (Sharma, Kilian, & Leung, 2014).

Social media has been widely adopted by both people and businesses. About 73% of Americans participate in at least one social media platform (Patel, 2015). Social media is used by both young and old. Granted, young adults (age 18–29) are the heaviest users with 90% using social media. Yet, older adults are experiencing high growth rates in usage. Adults age 35 and older have steadily been increasing their participation in social media (McCaughey et al., 2014). Social media usage for senior citizens (age 65 and older) has tripled since 2010; 35% now participate in social media (Perrin, 2015). These numbers give hospitals a good reason to embark into social media as a form of communication with patients and stakeholders.

The vast majority of U.S. companies use social media as part of their marketing (Bennett, 2014). Over 80% of Fortune 500 companies use social media, with the average firm using three platforms (Smith, Blazovich, & Smith, 2015). Of the companies that use social media, all but 10% feel their business has benefited as a result (Bughin, Buyers, & Chui, 2011). As a leading industry, health care had a slow start in joining the social media revolution. Between 2010 and 2012, the number

of health care providers using social media ranged from 21% to 26% (MacDonald, 2014; Ottenhoff, 2012). Since then however, the number of hospitals using social media has risen dramatically. In 2014, 94% of hospitals were utilizing social media in their marketing communications (MacDonald, 2014). Findings from this research show that 95% of the top-ranked hospitals are not only using social media, but are using multiple social media platforms.

The purpose of this study is to examine social media usage by hospitals. Specifically, this study addresses whether the types and number of social media platforms vary according to the size of the hospital and the types of services provided. While Facebook and Twitter are used by the majority of firms in all industries (manufacturing, retail, and service), research has shown that there are differences in which social media platforms are preferred by each industry. For example, service firms, like hospitals, are more aggressive users of company blogs and Google+ (Smith, Blazovich, & Smith, 2015). Social media platforms vary in their features, and thus, they appeal to different groups of people. This prompts the question of whether certain social media platforms are more appealing to people who partake in different health services offered by a hospital. Services can range from pediatrics to cancer treatment to transplants.

Literature review

Generic purposes of any business using social media includes creating brand awareness, engaging customers, shaping attitudes, and staying abreast of customer concerns and opinions (Smith, Blazovich, & Smith, 2015; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011). The acceptance of social media in the health care industry has inspired the term “Health 2.0” or “Medicine 2.0,” which uses Web technologies to enable social networking, participation, and openness between health care consumers and professionals (Eysenbach, 2008). This article will concentrate on one Web technology, social media, and its usage by health care providers, especially hospitals.

The purpose of social media in the health care industry

Health care providers are using social media to promote healthy habits and share health-related information. For example, a hospital’s Facebook may contain advice on healthy living, facts on seasonal illnesses, tips on preventative health behaviors, and relevant discoveries in medical research. During the flu season, one hospital posted vaccination reminders on Twitter (Sharma, Kilian, & Leung, 2014).

Social media is also used as a forum for patient questions, sharing knowledge, building community support, and gaining feedback on current services and future needs. Like any good marketing communication, a key to creating a useful social media post is to identify who is the target group of this post and then to provide valuable information that is relevant to that target. In other words, the goal is to share information that will make patient lives better and meet their needs. If people consistently gain valuable information from posts, they have a reason to actively

follow and engage with that company. Physician input is essential in ensuring that information provided in a post is accurate. However, physicians rarely have the time to devote to their company's social media. One option is to use a marketing person or consultant to create posts with the guidance of physicians (Sharma, Kilian, & Leung, 2014).

Companies that allow two-way communication to occur through social media can benefit from receiving feedback. This means allowing people to submit comments, ask questions, and receive answers. Of course, this opens the door for potential privacy violations. To prevent this, Web pages must be monitored diligently on a daily basis. The company should reserve the right to remove any information that violates confidentiality.

Health care organizations can use social media for standard marketing messages such as a mission statement, stating credentials, or a description of services provided. Social media can be a tool in educating the public about health issues. Many health care organizations raise financial support for themselves or a specific cause through social media (Backman et al., 2011). Social media is also being used in the employee recruitment process by posting positions that are unfilled at a company.

There are many types of social media platforms available. How does a hospital or company know which one to use? One way to evaluate the various platforms is by their depth of information and their half-life of information (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011). Depth of information denotes useful content along with many, diverse viewpoints. Social media that has many users usually offers depth of information. Half-life of information refers to how long the information will remain online. For example, tweets are short lived, whereas the information placed on a blog will remain a long time. The type of information a company wants to post may determine which social media platform to use. For example, Twitter may be used for breaking news, reminders, or quick conversations. Instagram may be chosen if the main focus is a picture. If a lot of information needs to be conveyed along with the picture, then Facebook is applicable.

In choosing which social media to use, a company needs to know which platforms are being used by their customers or the desired target group. Research shows that specific platform usage differs by gender, age, and rural versus urban living (Perrin, 2015). Different social media platforms can be used to reach people with specific demographics or with specific needs and interests. This article adds to that research by identifying social media being used in accordance with different health services offered by the hospital.

Mayo Clinic maintains a Health Care Social Media List that compiles health-related organizations actively using social networking sites. Organizations are included in this list on a voluntary basis. The three social media platforms being used most often by organizations on this list are Facebook, Twitter, and 4Square (Mayo Clinic, 2016). My study shows that Facebook and Twitter are the preferred platforms for the top 100 hospitals; however, YouTube is the third most used instead of 4Square. This finding of YouTube being ranked third corresponds to a study that

found people increasingly using YouTube to search for hospital information and selection (Honigman, 2016).

Pros and cons of social media

Social media is an effective tool in social marketing, which promotes socially beneficial behavior changes (Riegner, 2007). Socially beneficial behavior includes healthy behavior and lifestyles. The adoption of this type of behavior is significantly influenced by social contacts. Whether or not a person sticks to their diet, takes their medicine, or continues a healthy regime can depend on having contact with people who also engage in these behaviors (Centola, 2013). Thus, patients can benefit by engaging in their health care provider's social media and connecting with other patients. Research shows that social media impacts behavior because people are influenced by what their peers are saying. People trust peer comments to the extent that this information can reduce the amount of thought that goes into a personal decision. In other words, people use social media to reduce their cognitive exertion in making decisions (Mangold & Smith, 2012).

As a result of trust and sharing in social media communities, user-generated content can be very beneficial in social marketing campaigns, in which people share information that inspires behavior changes (Williams & Chinn, 2010). One study showed that 40% of people gleaned information from social media that helped them diet, exercise, or cope with a chronic condition (McNickle, 2012). The bottom line is that many people today go online to get information and advice, including guidance on health care. Some health care providers believe that social media is a tool for providing more patient-centered health care and, thus, increased patient happiness (Hawn, 2009). People groups that become highly engaged with a health care provider via social media can become loyal champions with friends and online relationships (Smith, Blazovich, & Smith, 2015).

Social media is especially useful for the health care industry in disseminating health-related information quickly among large groups of people. According to Centola (2013), knowledge about medical treatments has a significant affect upon population health. Social media platforms discard the traditional one-to-one dialogue and replace it with one-to-many communication or even many-to-many. Some say this arena with multiple voices, insights, and knowledge can result in more effective communications regarding health care (Hawn, 2009).

There are valid concerns regarding the privacy of patients' health information on social media platforms. With the large number of participants on a social media site, there is a greater chance of inappropriately sharing private information. There is the increased risk of HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) violations, if users are allowed to post personal experiences. HIPAA is regulated by the Privacy Rule implemented through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS.gov, 2016). There is also an increased possibility of spreading erroneous information. When users are allowed to post information, hospitals must be diligent in monitoring the site.

Not being able to control the conversation on a website is a major concern for health care organizations (Backman et al., 2011). In essence, the organization no longer controls what is publicly being said about it. However, the person in charge of the website does have the ability to highlight the positives. In regard to people who post negative comments, this is an opportunity for the health care provider to contact the person and make amends, possibly even correct the situation. Negative feedback can be an alert to mismanagement or a bad employee. Whether or not an organization has its own social media site, it is being talked about online. Having one's own site allows the organization to stay informed and be involved in guiding the conversation.

A burdensome aspect of social media is the time required to build and maintain the site, especially in updating and monitoring. Since it is difficult to measure the return on investment for social media, some wonder if the benefits outweigh the cost (Dooley, Jones, & Iverson, 2014). However, there is an overall conviction that social media is a worthwhile marketing tool (O'Connor, 2013). One study confirmed this with the finding that social media usage is positively related to patient's rating of a hospital and their likelihood to recommend the hospital (McCaughey et al., 2014). In another study, 41% of people said that comments on social media would affect their choice of a doctor and hospital (Ottenhoff, 2012).

Research questions and methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine whether the types and number of social media platforms vary according to the size of the hospital and the types of services it provides. The size of a hospital may be determined by the number of patient beds it contains. It is reasonable to expect that larger hospitals have more financial resources and are better able to hire people to establish and maintain multiple social media platforms. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: Does the size of a hospital, as measured by the number of beds, have an effect on the number of social media platforms used?

The review of literature indicated that different social media platforms are used to reach different target groups; people with different needs and interests. This leads to the second research question:

RQ2: Does use of social media platforms vary depending on specific hospital services provided?

The hospitals in this study were distinguished as Truven Health Analytics' 100 Top Hospitals in 2015. Analytics' annual 100 Top Hospitals study incorporates independent public data; proprietary, risk-adjusted, and peer-reviewed methodology; and key performance metrics to arrive at an objective, independent analysis of the best hospitals in the United States (100 Top Hospitals, 2015). Hospitals do not apply for consideration and do not pay anything in connection with this award. This honor has been a sought-after distinction for over 20 years.

Table 1. Description of social media platforms.

Social Media	Description
Facebook	Users create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages. Users may join common-interest user groups (Facebook, <i>n.d.</i>).
Twitter	Users send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters (Twitter, <i>n.d.</i>).
YouTube	A video-sharing website where users can upload and view videos (YouTube, <i>n.d.</i>).
Google+	Google's version of Facebook. Google+ Hangouts, a feature, allows one-stop shop for communications, combining instant messaging, text messaging, Internet phone calls, video messaging, and group chats (Goldman, 2015).
Firm blog/news	A discussion or informational site. Blogging is a form of social networking because it is interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments (Blog, <i>n.d.</i>).
Pinterest	Photo-sharing website that allows users to create theme-based image collections such as events, interests, or hobbies. Users browse other people's "pinboards" (Pinterest, <i>n.d.</i>).
LinkedIn	Social networking for people in professional occupations (LinkedIn, <i>n.d.</i>).

The company website for each hospital was examined for links to social media, which are displayed on the homepage of the website. All social media platforms, including company blogs, were documented. However, some of these social media platforms were not included in the statistical analysis because they were used by only a handful of hospitals. Seven platforms were not included, and four of these were used by just one hospital. Instagram was not included in the study because it was used by only six hospitals. The next least-used social media platform was used by 12 hospitals. Thus, the cut-off line for deciding which social media to include in the analysis was this: social media used by six or fewer hospitals were not included in the study. The final analysis consisted of seven social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, blog/news, Pinterest, and LinkedIn. These social media are described in [Table 1](#).

The website for each hospital was examined for a list of health services it provides. Since hospitals may use different names for comparable services, such as dermatology and skin disease, a medical doctor was consulted in categorizing the services. The doctor also assisted in grouping services that are related, such as obstetrics, birth, and maternity. This study included 34 health service categories, which will be listed later in the article.

Findings

Of the 100 hospitals in this study, 95% use social media. [Table 2](#) shows the percentage of hospitals using each social media platform.

Table 2. Percentage of hospitals using social media.

Social Media Platform	Hospitals Using Platform
Facebook	95
Twitter	79
YouTube	75
Google+	19
Firm Blog/News	19
Pinterest	18
LinkedIn	12

In reference to the first research question, regression analysis indicates that the number of hospital beds does have a significant effect on the number of social media platforms ($R^2 = .07, p < .01$). Large hospitals use more social media platforms. The number of beds within each hospital ranged from 31–1,700 beds. The number of social media used by each hospital ranged from 0–8 platforms. The average number of platforms used was 3.3.

Regression analysis indicates that the number of services a hospital offers has a significant effect on the number of social media ($R^2 = .07, p < .01$). Hospitals that offer more services use more social media platforms. This provides a foundation for asking the second research question: Does use of social media platforms vary depending on specific hospital services provided? Since hospitals offering more services also utilize more social media, this lends support to the idea that some platforms may be more applicable to certain services. The connection between services and social media will be more closely examined below. [Table 3](#) lists all hospital services in alphabetical order. For each service category, the table shows the percentage of hospitals using a specific social media platform and offering that service.

The social media in [Table 3](#) are listed in order of most overall usage to least. There are three preferred social media platforms for all of the hospital services: (a) Facebook, (b) Twitter, and (c) YouTube.

Facebook is the most commonly used social media by hospitals; almost all of the hospitals in this study maintain a Facebook site. There is not a significant difference in Facebook usage among the various services; usage ranges from 93%–97%. The widespread adoption of Facebook indicates that it is used in connection with a variety of services and purposes. Since there are 222 million Americans on Facebook, it makes sense that this is the most used platform by hospitals (Statista, 2016). Twitter is used by 79% of hospitals. There is a greater range in Twitter usage among services, from 64%–96% (Urgent Care being the 64%). The third most commonly used social media is YouTube with 75% of hospitals using it. Again there is a greater range of usage among services, from 71%–93%. Videos on YouTube are effective marketing communication tools because many people use YouTube as a search engine and prefer watching videos in order to learn information (Smith, Blazovich, & Smith, 2015). YouTube is an effective tool for acquiring new customers because videos are better able to portray the strengths of a company and insert the human element (Honigman, 2016).

Social media platforms other than the top three just discussed are used significantly less by hospitals. However, there is some variability in social media platforms depending on specific hospital services provided. Discussion in the remainder of this article will focus on hospital services that have at least 25% of hospitals using another social media platform in addition to the top three. For this study, usage by a fourth of the hospitals was deemed large enough for further discussion. [Table 4](#) shows the service categories that will be discussed in the following paragraphs, in alphabetical order. Hospitals offering these services use additional social media platforms along with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The social media included

**Table 3.** Percentage of hospitals using social media and offering service (services listed alphabetically).

Hospital Service	n	Average no. of platforms used	%					
			Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Google +	Firm blog /news	LinkedIn
Allergies/Asthma/Immunology	27	3.93	92.59	88.89	85.19	37.04	22.22	22.22
Behavior/Mental health/Addiction treatment	57	3.68	94.74	82.46	80.70	26.32	19.30	17.54
Birth/Obstetrics/Maternity/Fertility	70	3.36	92.86	77.14	71.43	21.43	20.00	14.29
Blood conservation/Disorders/Donation	24	3.46	100.00	91.67	83.33	16.67	16.67	12.50
Cancer/Oncology	84	3.35	94.05	78.57	78.57	20.24	17.86	11.90
Cardiology/Stroke/Heart	96	3.32	94.79	79.17	76.04	19.79	16.67	12.50
Critical care unit/Intensive care	66	3.15	93.94	75.76	75.76	24.24	15.15	9.09
Dermatology/Skin diseases	33	4.07	96.30	92.59	92.59	29.63	18.52	25.93
Diabetes and Endocrinology	27	3.48	95.24	80.95	84.13	19.05	19.05	14.29
Dietitians/Nutrition/Bariatrics/Weight loss	63	3.55	97.37	80.26	80.26	23.68	19.74	14.47
Emergency/Trauma/Hyperbaric center	76	3.38	95.79	81.05	75.79	18.95	20.00	11.58
ENT/Otolaryngology	95	3.77	94.87	87.18	74.36	30.77	20.51	23.08
Gastroenterology/Digestive/Liver	39	3.57	95.45	86.36	81.82	27.27	15.91	15.91
Gynecology/Breast/Osteoporosis	44	3.40	93.98	77.11	78.31	20.48	19.28	13.25
Imaging/Radiology	83	3.38	94.57	79.35	76.09	20.65	19.57	11.96
Kidney disease/Nephrology	92	3.96	96.30	88.89	92.59	33.33	11.11	22.22
Laboratory	27	3.24	95.65	78.26	76.09	17.39	8.70	17.39
Neurology/Neurosciences/Alzheimer's/Dementia	46	3.42	94.52	82.19	76.71	20.55	19.18	12.33
Occupational health	73	3.20	95.00	70.00	72.50	22.50	12.50	17.50
Ophthalmology/Eye/Vision	40	4.14	96.43	92.86	82.14	39.29	25.00	21.43
Orthopedic surgery/Bone and Joint institute	28	3.44	94.38	78.65	80.90	20.22	21.35	12.36
Palliative care/Hospice	89	3.38	90.57	79.25	75.47	20.75	18.87	16.98
Pediatrics/Neonatology/Adolescent health	53	3.32	95.45	74.24	80.30	16.67	21.21	12.12
Pulmonary medicine/Respiratory/Lung disease	59	2.42	96.61	83.05	72.88	20.34	15.25	13.56
Rehabilitation	81	3.44	96.30	82.72	76.54	19.75	16.05	14.81
Rheumatology/Arthritis	25	4.40	96.00	96.00	92.00	44.00	28.00	24.00
Senior Health/Geriatrics	35	3.71	97.14	85.71	80.00	22.86	11.43	28.57
Sleep disorders	66	3.40	93.94	77.27	78.79	21.21	16.67	15.15
Spine/Neck/Back and Chest pain	58	3.60	96.55	86.21	81.03	22.41	24.14	15.52
Sports medicine	35	3.71	97.14	80.00	85.71	28.57	11.43	28.57
Transplant	25	3.88	96.00	84.00	88.00	32.00	8.00	20.00
Urgent care	47	3.39	93.55	64.52	77.42	22.58	16.13	25.81
Urology/Pelvic floor disorders	31	3.87	95.74	85.11	89.36	29.79	21.28	19.15
Vascular/Vein care	47	3.45	93.62	85.11	76.60	19.15	14.89	12.77

Table 4. Services with social media^a used by $\geq 25\%$ of hospitals offering the service (percentages).

Hospital service	Google+	Firm blog/news	Pinterest	LinkedIn
Allergies/Asthma/Immunology	37.04	—	—	—
Behavior/Mental health/Addiction treatment	26.32	—	28.07	—
Dermatology/Skin diseases	29.63	—	25.93	25.93
ENT/Otolaryngology	30.77	—	28.21	—
Kidney disease/Nephrology	33.33	—	25.93	—
Ophthalmology/Eye/Vision	39.29	25.00	28.57	—
Rheumatology/Arthritis	44.00	28.00	36.00	—
Senior health/Geriatrics	—	—	—	28.57
Sports medicine	28.57	—	—	28.57
Transplant	32.00	—	28.00	—
Urology/Pelvic floor disorder	29.79	29.79	—	—

Note. “—” denotes less than a fourth of hospitals specializing in this service use this social media.

^aSocial media other than Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

in Table 4 are used by at least a fourth of hospitals specializing in that particular service.

Allergy/asthma/immunology

The category of allergy, asthma, and immunology relies heavily on the three most popular social media, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, but in addition, over a third of hospitals (37%) providing these services also use Google+. Since the average hospital usage of Google+ is 19%, this is a notable increase. Google+ is Google's version of Facebook. When it was introduced in 2011, its competitive advantage was that people could share items with specific “Circles” of people. This could be beneficial for patients with common illnesses and, thus, may be the reason many hospitals started using it. Since 2011, Facebook has added a similar feature and Google+ declined in use by the general population. Google+ has another feature that has remained popular, Google+ Hangouts. It is a one-stop shop for communications, combining instant messaging, text messaging, Internet phone calls, video messaging, and group chats (Goldman, 2015). Hangouts may be a reason some hospitals continue to use Google+ along with Facebook.

Behavior/mental health/addiction

For services related to behavior, mental health, and addiction, over a fourth of hospitals use Google+ and Pinterest. The benefits of Google+, as previously discussed, apply here as well. The benefits of social media in regard to social marketing are particularly applicable to this service category. A person's mental health and healthy habits are influenced by social contacts.

Pinterest has a unique characteristic in that 80% of its users are women. Women especially have a desire to maintain social contacts for support and encouragement. Pinterest has begun to position itself as a marketing tool because it now provides companies with access to data related to its brand and posts. In applying this to hospitals, if a post has a high number of “repins,” the hospital knows the subject of

the post is popular. It can be beneficial for hospitals to view user comments on their posts to learn people's opinions, likes, or needs (Pinterest, 2016).

Dermatology/skin disease

The category of dermatology and skin disease is one of the heaviest users of social media. Hospitals specializing in this service use an average of four social media platforms. Over 92% of the hospitals use with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In addition, almost 30% of these hospitals use Google+. About 26% use Pinterest and LinkedIn. Why LinkedIn? Almost half of LinkedIn users are under the age of 34; about a third of that group are ages 18–24. This a prime market for dermatologists. On the other end of the spectrum, 10% of LinkedIn users are over 55, a prime market for skin disease (Carlson, 2012).

ENT/otolaryngology

As shown in Table 4, hospitals specializing in ear, nose, throat (ENT), also known as otolaryngology, use a wide spectrum of social media. On average, the hospitals are maintaining four platforms. Besides using the top three platforms, almost a third of the hospitals use Google+. Pinterest is used by 28% of hospitals.

Kidney Disease/nephrology

A third of hospitals specializing in kidney disease, also referred to as nephrology, use Google+ as a social media platform. A fourth of the hospitals use Pinterest. This service category is one of the heaviest users of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Thus, nephrology seems to be very adaptive to social media.

Ophthalmology/Eye/vision

Hospitals offering ophthalmology services, also referred to as eye or vision services, use a wide range of social media. Google+ is used by 39% of the hospitals with this service. Pinterest is used by 28%. What makes this service unique from the other services previously examined is that 25% of the hospitals have a blog or company news. There are only three service categories in which a fourth of the hospitals maintain a blog or news page. The other two service categories are urology/pelvic floor disorder and rheumatology/arthritis.

Rheumatology/arthritis

Hospitals specializing in rheumatology and arthritis are among the heaviest users of social media. On average, this category employs the highest number of social media platforms, 4.4. Each of the top platforms, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, are used by over 92% of the hospitals. In addition, 44% use Google+. Hospitals with

this service are the strongest users of Pinterest (36%). Almost a fourth (24%) of the hospitals use LinkedIn. This service is unique in that 28% of the hospitals maintain a blog or company news page. As discussed previously, these social media platforms each contain some unique features and reach an assortment of people, from women to those over age 55.

Senior Health/geriatrics

Besides the top three platforms, hospitals with health services for seniors, also called geriatrics, mainly use one other platform—LinkedIn. A good reason for this is that 10% of LinkedIn users are over 55. As formerly mentioned social media usage, especially Facebook, has increased among senior citizens.

Sports medicine

As shown in [Table 4](#), the top three social media platforms are all used by hospitals concentrating on sports medicine, however, there is a heavy concentration on Facebook with 97% of hospitals using it. In addition, 28% of the hospitals use Google+. Hospitals specializing in sports medicine are the strongest users of LinkedIn.

Transplant

Hospitals that specialize in transplants are using Google+ and Pinterest to reach their constituents. These hospitals are also one of the heaviest users of Facebook. Through social media, patients can be advocates for a hospital. Patients who share their positive experiences can influence others and enhance the image of a hospital. Personal stories are especially powerful in building goodwill and a positive reputation.

Urology/pelvic floor disorders

Almost 30% of hospitals offering services related to urology and pelvic floor disorders use blogs and Google+ as social media tools. As mentioned earlier, maintaining a blog or news page is not very common among all of the 100 hospitals in the sample.

Discussion

With 73% of Americans engaged in social media, it is no longer a question of whether hospitals should use social media in their marketing communications, it is a question of which social media platforms to use. This study can help with that quandary. Since the vast majority of the 100 Top Hospitals in the study use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, that is a good indication those platforms are valuable. Other hospitals can benefit from following their lead. All three of these social

media platforms attract numerous and diverse people who can contribute knowledge, personal experiences, and feedback on hospital operations. This can lead to more patient-centered health care, which in turn leads to increased patient happiness. Those happy feelings can transfer into a sense of loyalty for the hospital. Loyal customers are more likely to be brand advocates. Thus, patients benefit by feeling better about their health care and hospitals benefit by having a positive image in the marketplace.

Social media is beneficial only if it is handled properly. Due to the large time commitment required in creating posts and monitoring social media sites, engaging a marketing person for this job is ideal. However, a physician should oversee that any medical information is accurate and up-to-date. Posts on social media must provide value in order to attract and retain users. The following are tips for creating a social media post: (a) information must be accurate and relevant to the user; (b) allow users to post comments; and (c) include doctor input; and (d) continuously monitor and interact with the social media platform.

If a hospital has the resources to operate additional social media platforms, here are some suggestions. A company blog is used by hospitals that offer services related to ophthalmology, arthritis and rheumatology, urology, and pelvic floor disorders. LinkedIn is used by hospitals that specialize in dermatology, geriatrics, and sports medicine. Pinterest is used by hospitals concentrating on behavior problems, dermatology, ENT, kidney disease, ophthalmology, geriatrics, and transplants. Google+ is connected to a wide range of health services; however, its user base is diminishing. Facebook may work just as well today.

Conclusions and marketing implications

Social media usage by health care organizations has increased dramatically in the past few years. Findings from this research show that 95% of the top-ranked hospitals are not only using social media, but are using multiple social media platforms as well. The purpose of this study is to examine whether the types and number of social media platforms vary according to the size of the hospital and the types of services provided. Social media platforms vary in their features, and thus, they appeal to different groups of people.

The hospitals in this study were distinguished as Truven Health Analytics' 100 Top Hospitals in 2015. The analysis in the study consisted of 34 hospital service categories and seven social media platforms. Of the 100 hospitals in this study, 95% use social media. Regression analysis indicates that the number of hospital beds is positively related to the number of social media platforms used by the hospital. Regression analysis also showed the number of services a hospital offers to be positively related to the number of social media platforms. The average number of platforms used by a hospital in the sample was 3.3.

Health care providers are using social media to promote healthy habits and share health-related information. This means of communication is especially useful for

the health care industry in disseminating health-related information quickly among large groups of people. It can be a tool in educating the public about health issues. Social media is also used as a forum for patient questions, sharing knowledge, building community goodwill, and gaining feedback on current services and future needs. Because there is a high level of trust and sharing in social media communities, user-generated content can be very beneficial in inspiring healthy lifestyles. Social media can be used for standard marketing messages such as a mission statement, stating credentials, or a description of services provided. Many health care organizations raise financial support for themselves or a specific cause through social media.

A key to creating a good social media post is to share information that will make patients' lives better and meet their needs. Preferably, people should be allowed to submit comments, ask questions, and receive answers. Of course, this opens the door for potential privacy violations. To prevent this, web pages must be monitored diligently on a daily basis. Not being able to control the conversation on a website is a major concern for health care organizations. However, online conversations about an organization are going to occur regardless of whether or not the company has its own social media site. Having one's own site allows the company to stay informed and be involved in guiding the conversation.

In choosing which social media to use, a company needs to know which platforms are being used by their customers or the desired target group. The vast majority of hospitals overwhelmingly use these three social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Different social media platforms can be used to reach people with specific demographics or with specific needs and interests. Findings revealed some differences in the usage of other platforms depending on hospital services. For example, hospitals specializing in rheumatology and arthritis are the strongest users of Pinterest. Hospitals specializing in sports medicine are the strongest users of LinkedIn.

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