



READY TO INTERACT: SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY U.S. HOSPITALS AND HEALTH SYSTEMS





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Use of social media among healthcare organizations is growing rapidly. Organizations are finding that social media can be a powerful tool for monitoring one's brand, reaching out to patients and consumers in the community, supporting patient education, and recruiting new talent.

The next step for hospitals and health systems will be to use social media more strategically. The risk and cost of doing so is relatively small, yet the upside includes potentially substantial performance improvements and the realization of sizable competitive advantages.

Executive Summary

Use of social media by hospitals is growing for basic, non-clinical purposes such as marketing, communications and brand management. In most hospitals that use social media, the function is handled by the marketing and/or public relations departments, not clinicians. Hospitals rate their experience with social media as overwhelmingly positive.

Now that organizations are comfortable using social media in a basic unidirectional way, it is time to consider using these technologies more strategically. The next step in maximizing value will be to become more interactive by engaging patients and enhancing patient satisfaction. This next phase could also include connecting consumers and providers and providing insights to inform product development. For this to occur, clinical departments will need to become more involved. For instance, special teams could be formed with clinical representation to respond to certain types of event triggers using clearly-written procedures and guidelines.

Social Media Use: Survey Results

In July and August of 2012, CSC surveyed 36 U.S. hospitals and health systems on their use of social media. In this paper, we highlight our key findings and offer our own latest thinking on the topic.

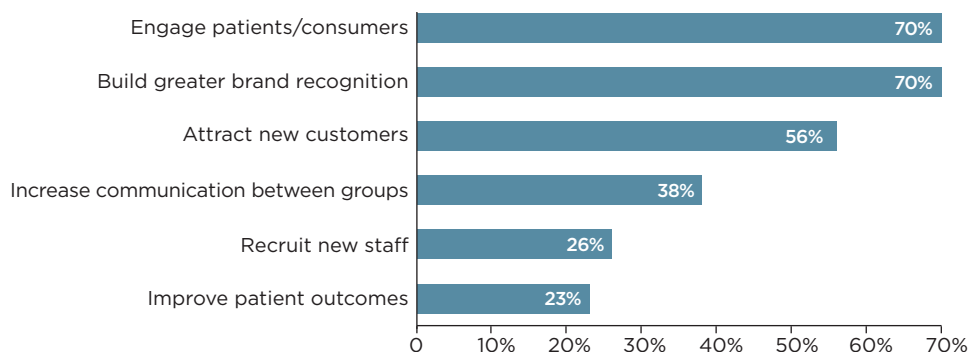
The main purposes for which organizations use social media continue to be related to marketing, brand awareness and brand management. Organizations are also using social media to promote wellness and healthy behaviors through the dissemination of generic information for a general audience. Direct engagement with individual patients remains uncommon. Just one organization indicated that it uses social media to aid in care coordination and/or care management. None of the respondents reported using social media to recruit volunteers for clinical trials or for product research and development.

“For what purpose does your organization use social media?” (Top responses)



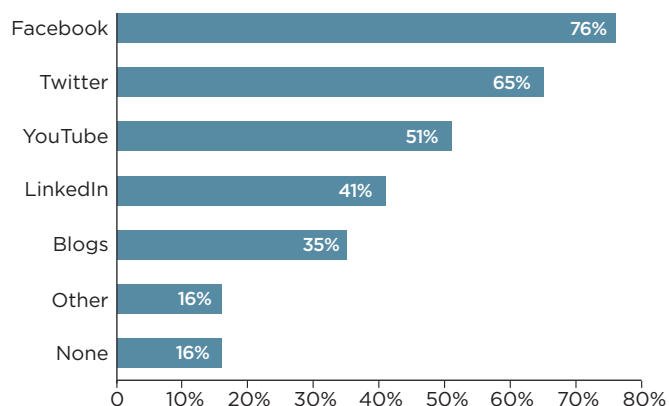
The focus on brand management and name recognition was also evident in the objectives of organizations using social media. The most popular answers were to engage patients and consumers, build brand recognition, and attract new customers. Improving patient outcomes was not a popular objective, with less than a quarter of companies (23%) making that a primary objective.

“What are your organization’s primary objectives in using social media?”
(Top responses)



Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were by far the most popular social media tools. Most organizations focus their efforts on these existing communities, where consumers already are, as opposed to building new communities on their own blogs. Three respondents mentioned that their organizations use a private (or enterprise-level) social media tool (in this case, Yammer). Though these tools are new to the market, they can be a good complementary approach for creating internal communities.

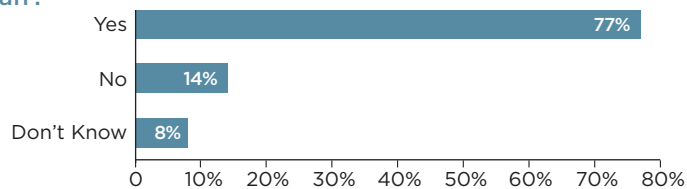
“Which of the following social media tools does your organization use?”



Very few organizations that responded to our survey said they do not use social media at all. But among those who do not, the main reasons cited are 1) fear of liability or malpractice concerns, and 2) concerns that users will post negative comments about the organization. Some organizations do not get involved in social media because they do not feel they have the expertise needed.

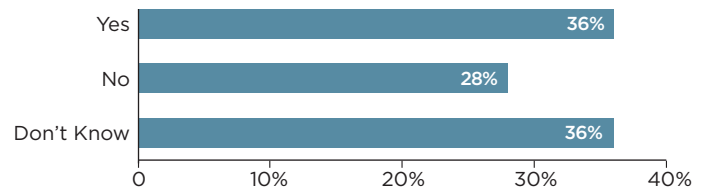
Awareness of the importance of having policies appears to be fairly strong. More than three quarters of respondents have a social media policy in place to help communicate to staff how to use social media appropriately. The remaining respondents either do not have such a policy in place or do not know if they have one in place.

“Does your organization have a social media policy that outlines appropriate social media use for staff?”



Although most hospitals have an internal policy in place to educate employees, far fewer were confident that their organization had a disclaimer posted on their site cautioning patients not to construe information as medical advice. Many respondents did not know if such a disclaimer was in place.

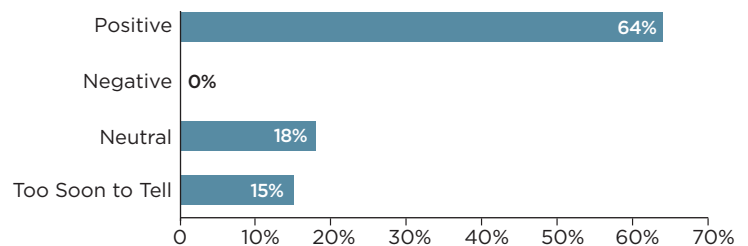
“Does your organization post a social media disclaimer on your social media site that cautions patients not to take information shared on the site as medical advice?”



As for which department(s) are in charge of manage social media activities, this responsibility overwhelmingly falls to the communications/marketing/public relations department (89%). Only in a negligible number of cases is this placed in the hands of another group, such as IT or clinical care. This is consistent with what other recent research has found in the healthcare industry.¹

The hospitals we surveyed rated their overall experience with social media as generally positive. Overall, 64% of organizations rate it as positive, with another 18% calling it neutral. Most of the remaining respondents felt it was too early to tell. No organization was negative.

“Overall, how would you rate your organization’s experience with social media”



For the question asking organizations to rate their overall experience with social media, some of the respondents provided interesting free-text follow-up and justification. The comments, edited only for clarity and grammar, include:

“The hospital has found many ‘friends.’ The daily and hourly tracking helps us communicate education content, press releases, daily notes of health and well-being, and just plain getting our brand out without a lot of heavy lifting. What you can publish in less than 3 minutes on social media would not have gotten out for days or weeks in the old printed format.”

“We have had a number of people liking us on Facebook and coming to our events.”

“Physicians, employees, and patients have posted positive comments about their experience with our hospital. We have heard from patients and community members that they have read these posts.”

“We have aggressively pursued the use of social media. It’s been extremely helpful improving communications internally within the organization.”

“We now have less expensive channels to communicate tips for healthy living as well as health system news and events to a broad audience. Also, we have had opportunities to answer questions and resolve issues via social media channels that would have otherwise gone unaddressed.”

Discussion

The results of these surveys confirm our latest thinking on social media, which is that use of social media by healthcare organizations is increasing in adoption, but still relatively basic in complexity and sophistication. We found higher adoption rates (above 70%) than some other researchers (e.g., the 21% reported by Bennett²), but this can be explained by our targeted sample. Our finding of high levels of social media usage for the purposes of marketing, communications and brand management are very consistent with other research, which has found that the vast majority of institutions use social media for unidirectional communication.³

We believe that, having built familiarity and comfort with basic social media use, it is now time for hospitals to use social media in a more advanced way to achieve their strategic goals. Social media has most certainly arrived. The movement has millions of active users, is based on mature technology, and for many people it has the cachet of being new, fast, exciting and more “authentic” than many traditional modes of communication (e.g., commercials, printed literature, press releases).

Research has found that people are expanding their personal peer network to online peers, and that they are increasingly using this network as a source of health-related information and advice.⁴ Many patients report benefitting from connecting with other patients experiencing the same symptoms and being directed to relevant patient education materials.⁵

Health professionals, of course, do continue to play a central role for people when they need health information and attention.⁶ Social media can influence where patients go and to whom they turn when they need or want to engage. Hospitals can and should use social media to help achieve strategic goals. They should look for opportunities to go beyond just listening to consumers to connecting consumers and providers, gaining insights to inform product development, and responding to patient needs more rapidly.

Social media can also be a tremendously powerful tool for enhancing patient satisfaction. For example, at one hospital, the patient satisfaction team monitors Twitter for negative comments. When they noticed a tweet sent from a patient in the Emergency Department who was dissatisfied with his long wait in the waiting room, they sent someone to the ED and discovered that the patient had failed to check in properly. They helped him register using the kiosk, and he was seen shortly thereafter.⁷ Such rapid response can be a double-edged sword, however. Other research has shown that once an organization makes its practices of connecting and responding to patient needs known, then service expectations for things like turnaround time and complaint resolution rise.⁸

Another important aspect of the next generation of care is patient engagement. Social media, which often complements mobile devices, can help organizations motivate patients to become more active participants in their own care.

Recommendations

The best practices and leading edge ideas for social media are still evolving, but some basic recommendations include:

- Develop an overarching strategy of how to make social media work for you. Begin with easy areas such as marketing and communications, proceed to patient education and announcements, and then look for ways to leverage social media to improve care and generate other benefits. Look for ways to connect patients to providers, or providers to each other.
- Get involved in social media now at whatever level you feel comfortable with and/or have the resources to manage (do not take a wait-and-see attitude or it will be too late and your patients will find someone else to interact with). It is often possible to recruit savvy users internally who are excited about the technology.

- Preempt possible negative experiences by communicating openly about social media with employees and with patients. Develop a social media policy that outlines appropriate use for staff, and post a disclaimer on your site informing patients that information provided is not meant to serve as medical advice. Social media is a force for good; concerns about the use of social media are often overstated. Individuals are more likely to share positive health-related experiences via social media than negative experiences.

About the Surveys

The information in this paper is based on surveys conducted by CSC in July and August of 2012. The topic studied was the use of social media by hospitals. We asked hospitals and health systems how they are using social media tools. The questions we asked and answer options can be found in Appendix I. We received a total of 36 completed responses. (Note: percentages might not add to 100 due to rounding.)

Acknowledgments

CSC would like to thank the hospital and health system leaders and executives who responded to our survey. The author would also like to thank Jordan Battani, Managing Director of CSC's Global Institute for Emerging Healthcare Practices, for her contributions to the design of the survey.

About the Author

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Appendix. Survey Questions

(Audience: Healthcare Industry Organizations)

Social Media in Healthcare

Thank you for your interest in CSC's survey on the topic of social media. We are conducting this brief, one-page survey as part of our continued research on how healthcare organizations are using social media.

Your answers will be kept confidential and you will not be named or identified in any way. Furthermore, we will not follow up with any questions or requests, unless you wish to provide your contact information at the end of the survey.

The results of the survey will be incorporated into a future white paper that will be made available for free on CSC.com.

1a) What is the name of your organization?

1b) Which of the following best describes your organization?

- Hospital
- Health plan
- Academic medical center
- Health system
- Physician organization
- Other (please specify)

Social Media in Healthcare

2) For what purpose does your organization use social media? (check all that apply)

- Marketing services or products
- Workforce recruitment
- Brand management
- Consumer relations
- Distribute educational information
- Encourage health professional education/collaboration
- Host your own online community
- Promote wellness and healthy behaviors
- Monitor patients and/or populations
- Aid in care coordination and/or care management
- Recruit volunteers for clinical trials
- Facilitate research collaboration
- Product research and development
- Reputation management (i.e., monitoring and responding to what is being said about you)
- We don't use social media
- Other (please specify)

3) What are your organization's primary objectives in using social media? (choose up to three)

- Attract new customers
- Build greater brand recognition
- Increase communication between groups
- Engage patients / consumers
- Improve patient outcomes
- Recruit new staff
- Locate volunteers for clinical trials
- Gain new insight to develop new products
- Don't know
- Other (please specify)

Social Media in Healthcare

4) Which of the following social media tools does your organization use? (check all that apply)

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Blogs (i.e., your organization writes its own blog)
- LinkedIn
- YouTube
- None
- Other (please specify)

5) If your organization does not use social media, why not?

- Social media is just a fad; it's not worth bothering with
- Fear of liability or malpractice concerns
- Concern that users will post negative comments about your organization
- Too much work
- Lack social media expertise
- Other (please specify)

6) Does your organization have a social media policy that outlines appropriate social media use for staff?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

7) Does your organization post a social media disclaimer on your social media site that cautions patients not to take information shared on site as medical advice?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Social Media in Healthcare

8) Which department(s) manage your organization's social media activities?

- Communications / Marketing / Public relations
- IT
- Clinical departments (i.e., care management, care coordination)
- It is decentralized across many departments
- Other (please specify)

9) Overall, how would you rate your organization's experience with social media?

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral
- Too soon to tell
- Other (please specify)

10). Please describe why you rated your organization's experience as positive, negative, neutral, or too soon to tell.

11) To receive early notice of any white paper that may be published as a result of this survey, provide us with your email address.

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