

The Strategic Imperative for the Use of Social Media in Health Care

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Abstract

Although health care lags behind many other industries in adopting social media as part of a business strategy, the Mayo Clinic recognized the importance of these applications more than a decade ago. In addition to typical media relations and marketing tactics, the Mayo Clinic has successfully used social media as part of an overall program to support the strategic imperatives of the institution.

Key Words: Brand, business strategy, marketing, patient demand, social media

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INTRODUCTION

Brand research conducted in the 1990s to understand the factors driving consumer and patient choice of our institution for diagnosis and treatment of serious medical conditions identified two key sources of information determining these preferences: news stories reported by traditional media outlets and word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied patients and referring physicians.

Traditional methods of facilitating word-of-mouth recommendations have evolved over time. In the late 2000s, peer-based social media health networks seemed poised to play a powerful role in shaping many health care–related decisions. A Pew Research Center survey found that 60% of US adults used the Internet to find health care information, and 10% used social media to follow their friends' health care experiences [1]. Another study found that social media, including online forums and message boards, were being used as sources of information about health and wellness by 34% [2].

Since then, social media use in health care has continued to grow exponentially [3].

Around this same time, the Mayo Clinic made a strategic investment in social media. The Mayo Clinic would use social media not just in news media relations and marketing but throughout the organization to improve care for patients and their families, enhance health consumer education, advance medical research, and expand brand awareness for the Mayo Clinic.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MARKETING

The passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010 resulted in a significant shift in the direction of health care in the United States [4]. Patients increasingly bear the burden of rising health care costs, narrow insurer networks limit choice, and numerous health care institutions are reporting quality outcomes and patient satisfaction metrics. In this new milieu, organizations must differentiate themselves in the market to drive demand for their services and support their business models. A digital presence through social media can define the organization's or individual practitioner's brand, expand the reach of an organization, and ultimately support patient appointment demand generation.

Given that word-of-mouth references continue to be a primary driver of patient referrals in health care, social media tactics have the ability to exponentially enhance this referral network. Facebook, with 1.7 billion active

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monthly users, and Twitter, with 6,000 tweets per second [5], have the potential to reach a massive audience. In addition to Facebook and Twitter, professional social media sites such as Doximity and LinkedIn offer a diverse portfolio of media to convey messages to both health consumers and referring providers. Each of these social media tactics targets a different segment of the health care constituency, but overall, they all contribute to building brand awareness, a key component of the strategic marketing plan.

Like other tactics within a strategic plan, social media tactics must have clearly defined objectives that can be measured and shared with organizational leadership so that appropriate investments in personnel and other resources can be made to sustain or grow these activities. Key performance indicators such as reach, click-through rates, impressions, posts, and followers must be tracked, interpreted, and documented relative to targets for each initiative (Table 1).

Over the years, we have expanded our reach on social media. Our enterprise Facebook page has amassed 970,000 likes and our Twitter account 1.5 million followers. Videos on our YouTube channel were viewed more than 4.9 million times in 2016 alone (Fig. 1).

The Mayo Clinic's all-time top social media post introduced a face transplant recipient to health consumers. This 2017 Facebook post received 102,800 likes and reactions, 7,800 comments, and 78,800 shares and reached more than 25 million people [6].

GENERATING APPOINTMENT DEMAND

In addition to building brand, social media can also have an impact on patient requests for appointments. Using Google Analytics, the number of people who navigated to www.mayoclinic.org from social media sites is followed, and subsequent appointment requests are tracked. This

allows the marketing and social media teams to analyze which social media applications are generating the most appointment request activity and then adjust tactics accordingly. The total number of social media referrals that led to appointment requests at our institution increased by 139% between 2015 and 2016. Although 20 different social media referral sites yielded appointment requests, Facebook was the top referrer, drawing in 81% of referrals from social media in 2015 and accounting for 88% in 2016.

Health care providers' participation in social media can have a direct impact on building their individual reputations as well as bringing patients to their specialty areas of practice. Participation in social media can not only establish a positive provider reputation; it can also counter rare negative perceptions regarding a practice or health care provider [7].

In early 2009, Ruben Mesa, MD, created a YouTube video on myelofibrosis that has since received almost 16,000 views [8]. After the video was online for about 7 months, Dr Mesa observed that almost all new out-of-state patients mentioned his video work as a reason for seeking care at Mayo Clinic (personal communication). After Dr Mesa transferred from the Florida to Arizona campus in late 2009, the number of unique myelofibrosis patients seen on the Arizona campus increased by more than 150%, whereas numbers for similar patients on our Florida campus have stayed relatively steady (Fig. 2).

IMPROVING THE PATIENT CARE EXPERIENCE

The patient experience often begins long before a patient arrives at a doctor's office. Social media can be an important tool to reach out to patients before their appointments to improve their experience and potentially decrease anxiety associated with their care. It also provides a useful forum in which to connect patients with similar

Table 1. Social media key performance indicators

Metric	Quarterly Target	Actual	
		2016, Fourth Quarter	2017, First Quarter
New Mayo Clinic Connect members	1,200	2,030	2,470
Shares of Mayo Clinic posts on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Google+	146,000	NA	270,000
Social media referrals to MayoClinic.org	900,000	703,000	928,000
Clicks on MayoCl.in links and on other bit.ly links shortened by Mayo Clinic	1200,000	972,000	1443,000
Facebook reach	45 million	50 million	95 million
Twitter reach	1,800 million	1,940 million	2,064 million

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