

HEALTHCARE MARKETING ADVISOR

Strategies for promoting your healthcare organization

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Community relations

Plan to expand? People are key to success

Alta Bates Summit Medical Center, a 1,094-bed medical center in Berkeley, CA, was in great need of more space in its emergency department (ED). But when it decided that expansion was the best course of action, it faced opposition from some vocal neighbors. In the end, the hospital received permission to build, thanks to a strong communications effort bolstered by already-fostered community support.

The hospital, whose buildings were constructed in the 1960s, found its ED bursting at the seams and its radiology department using less and less space.

The facility needed upgrading to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and California state laws that mandate earthquake-resistant construction.

Most of the construction was going to take place inside the building, but part of renovating the ED included construction of a new ambulance bay on the exterior of the hospital. This part of the project raised the most concern from the surrounding community, says **Carolyn Kemp**, director of public relations at Alta Bates Summit.

"This is definitely a residential area," she says. "Go three blocks in one direction and one block in the other direction, and there are businesses and retail, but where we happen to be, it's all homes."

Neighbors of the hospital came to public hearings and meetings to express their concerns. They feared that a bigger ED would bring more ambulance traffic, disrupting the neighborhood

with vehicle and siren noise. They also worried that construction vehicles would create further disturbance.

However, the opposition wasn't unexpected, Kemp says. From the beginning, the public affairs staff worked with hospital management to make sure that the facility was talking with those who harbored the most concern.

"We learned a lot about immediacy and good communication. We talked about what was occurring right then. As soon as information was available to us, we'd share it with the community."

"We learned a lot about immediacy and good communication," she says. "As soon as information was available to us, we'd share it with the community." That information-sharing included holding community forums and weekly meetings. Kemp's office also used mailings and press walk-throughs to keep the city informed about what was happening at the hospital.

This type of open communication is essential for a hospital planning to expand or renovate, says **Rick Wade**, senior vice president for communications with the American Hospital Association. In fact, communication can play a key role in whether construction plans move forward.

Market strategy

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To foster superior performance in business intelligence, your entire leadership—operational, clinical, and financial—must support the venture.

Put differently, your organization's strategic vision must align with management's objectives, and there must be incentives in place to help drive management's behavior to support business intelligence.

Taking the next steps

Quality should become increasingly a primary market differentiator for healthcare organizations in the years ahead. To lead with quality and position your organization as a strong performer in the market, you must have a vision that unifies the four quality dimensions.

From this cohesive vantage point, you can then define a tacti-

cal approach to target specific measures. Areas such as patient safety, risk prevention and management, evidenced-based practices, regulatory compliance, clinical information management, and public performance measurements for consumer reports often benefit immediately from this integrated approach.

This, in turn, can result in increased reimbursement (e.g., the current federal pay-for-performance estimates to other payers), reduced costs, and improved revenues through increased market share and clinical program growth. Most important, it can lead to improvements in the quality of patients' lives and their long-term health. **■**

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Web strategy

Healthcare blogging picture becoming clearer

Before F. Nicholas Jacobs, CEO of Windber Research Institute and Windber Medical Center in Pennsylvania, started blogging, he was just another hospital CEO. But after writing his own blog, Windberblog, for two years and becoming a regular contributor to Hospital Impact—a blog that sees 200,000–300,000 visits per year—Jacobs was able to deepen his hospital's relationship with the community and improve his relations with hospital staff.

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, **120,000 bloggers write about healthcare on a regular basis.**

Jacobs is not the only one joining the healthcare blog train. He's far from it, in fact. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 120,000 bloggers write about healthcare on a regular basis. Who are all of these people, you ask?

Until recently, they were heard from often, but still unknown. But results of a survey conducted last year have

brought to light more information about those whose key-strokes tell what's happening in healthcare. The survey, conducted by Envision Solutions, LLC, in New York City and The Media Blog Network, gives marketers looking to infiltrate the social media scene new insight into this online world.

Physicians, administrators, information technology professionals, and patients were among the 214 individuals who responded to the survey "Taking the Pulse of the Healthcare Blogosphere" last fall. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed were from the United States. Between 3% and 5% were from Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Netherlands. Fifty-four percent of bloggers surveyed were men, and 46% were women.

The survey, says Fard Johnmar, owner and founder of Envision, a healthcare marketing and communications consulting firm, was an attempt to find out more about those behind the blogs. "More information is becoming known about blogging in general," he says. "But there was still not much information about healthcare blogging."

The survey did learn more about the global healthcare

blogosphere, finding that 40% of bloggers do so to share their opinions or educate others, with 72% of respondents reporting an audience of healthcare providers, the general public, or patients. Sixty-one percent said they write about personal experiences, 56% about health news, 55% about health business, and 51% about healthcare policy.

When it comes to hits on a blog, 55% of bloggers reported zero to 100 visitors per day, and 24% said their sites saw between 101 and 500 daily visitors. The survey showed that the longer a blogger has been writing about healthcare, the larger his or her audience.

Marketers have to stop trying to control information and instead, change their strategy to **one of encouragement and engagement.**

Initially, Johnmar says he was more surprised by the number of bloggers who blog under an assumed name. “However, after thinking about it . . . they see themselves as whistleblowers,” he says. “Given the dynamics of healthcare, it’s less surprising.” Physicians may blog anonymously to

- » protect the privacy of their patients. Doctors don’t want to be discussing patients’ conditions online, only to have other patients log on, read the posts, and wonder whether the doctor might be writing about them, too, Johnmar says.
- » protect their identities if/when they offer controversial opinions about their organizations or administrations.

“There are different reasons [physicians] blog anonymously,” Johnmar says. When they do so, they face an uphill battle in getting their peers to trust what they write. The survey says 53% of respondents believe 41%–80% of healthcare blogs are written by those whose statements can be taken “at face value.”

But Jacobs didn’t find it difficult to get his readers to trust him. In fact, a local newspaper asked him to be a regular columnist. Doing so, he says, strengthened the hospital’s connection to its community and showed readers that he’s a “real person.”

Not only that, but the more candid and the less cautious he became, the more people read his blog. At last count, more than 35,000 people had visited his site.

Not your everyday bloggers

Jacobs’ experience may not be typical to blogging in general, but it seems typical of the experience for other healthcare bloggers. That’s because the norm for blogging doesn’t always apply to healthcare. Unlike business blogs, for which it is said a writer can lose his or her audience by not posting new information at least several times per week, healthcare blogging is less demanding.

That’s good news, considering what the Envision survey revealed. Forty-seven percent of those who responded to the survey said they spend between one and two hours on their blog each day, but just as many (43%) said they spend less than an hour per day on the blog.

“Blogging does take time, but it looks like people are blogging when they want to,” Johnmar says. “The idea of having to blog every day doesn’t seem to apply as much to healthcare bloggers.”

An open door to getting a message out?

Most healthcare organizations don’t yet have their own blogs, but those who do have started realizing the potential a blog has to get a message out. Public relations (PR) and marketing professionals have begun to realize this as well. Twenty-nine percent of healthcare bloggers surveyed said a PR professional had contacted them to write about a specific topic or a certain angle of a topic.

Of those contacted, 52% reported having written one or more posts based on information given to them by that PR professional. This is good news for marketers who have been looking for a way to use healthcare blogs to their advantage.

Johnmar, who writes the HealthcareVox blog, says PR professionals have approached him regarding writing about a particular subject. “First, I ask them to read the blog to see what I’m all about, and then I usually ask them for some kind of inside scoop, something readers won’t find anywhere else,” he says. Having an inside scoop brings new readership to his blog and makes him more likely to write about the subject, he says.

Advertising is another way to get a message across using blogs. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said they currently run advertising on their blogs, and 54% said they are willing to run or will continue to run advertising.

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Web strategy

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However, the jury is still out when it comes to the credibility of those who choose to run advertisements. When asked whether “running advertising on a healthcare blog negatively affects a blogger’s credibility,” 41% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 33% either strongly agreed or agreed with it. It more or less came down to this: “A blogger’s background and biases have a greater impact on his/her credibility than advertising,” a statement with which 68% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed.

Step inside the blogosphere

Now that more is known about bloggers, their reasons for blogging, and their readership, Johnmar says the time has come for more of the healthcare industry to take the step Jacobs did to enter the blogosphere and use social media to its advantage.

When presenting your information, use traditional media—advertising, television, and newspapers—and new media—blogs, podcasts, bulletin boards, and wikis. Wikis are Web sites that allow anyone visiting them to add, remove, and edit content.

But stepping outside of the information-dissemination comfort zone isn’t easy. Jacobs says when he first started his blog, it was very “annual-reportish,” but as time went on, he became more open and a little less cautious. As his style changed, he saw a dramatic increase in the number of people reading his blog.

Johnmar says this is a difficult transition for many, especially those in healthcare marketing and communications who have held on to the notion that all information released to the media must be controlled. Although traditional media outlets allow this to happen, the expanding blogosphere won’t let that continue. “Information is changing as it goes from one place to another in the social media realm,” Johnmar says.

That may mean that marketers have to stop trying to con-

trol information and instead change their strategy to one of encouragement and engagement. This involves researching and seeking out the most influential bloggers to encourage accurate postings about healthcare and its organizations. “It’s not about control, but [it’s about] engage and control,” Johnmar says. “The bloggers will take the messages and communicate them in their own way.”

Although this method still won’t give marketers total control, it will make it more likely that the information will come out in a way that benefits the organization, Johnmar says. A story or posting published on a blog or podcast that contains inaccuracies can easily be clarified or corrected in the comments section of the blog without causing embarrassment to the organization.

Using others to get your message out

If you’re going to rely on others to get your information into the blogosphere, the first step is to research what social media possibilities are out there and decide what messages you want to convey, says Johnmar in his e-book *From Command & Control to Engage & Encourage*. Understanding the type of content that blogs and podcasts typically carry will increase the likelihood that your message will be delivered in your desired fashion, Johnmar says.

When presenting your information, use traditional media—advertising, television, and newspapers—and new media—blogs, podcasts, bulletin boards, and wikis. Wikis are Web sites that allow anyone visiting them to add, remove, and edit content. Johnmar also recommends that you develop a multimedia presentation and upload it to YouTube (www.youtube.com), a free video-sharing Web site that gets millions of hits each day.

As your information plays out in both traditional and new media, monitor the coverage to make sure that the accurate message gets out there. Lastly, Johnmar recommends measuring the response to your campaign. Ask those attend-

Questions? Comments? Ideas?

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ing an event how they heard about it. Is attendance at this event higher or lower than others advertised in the newspaper? Answering these questions should give you an idea about whether you've chosen the right kind of new media outlet.

Starting your own blog

For Jacobs, the blogging experience has been a good one so far, he says. "It's been a very interesting experience for me, because it has led to several other things that have helped develop relationships" with people outside of and within his hospital's walls. When he's writing on Windberblog, he's mostly speaking to employees. When he writes for Hospital Impact, another healthcare blog, he focuses more on national trends and his leadership philosophy.

"I have an open-door policy, and I try to do as much communicating as I can," Jacobs says. His employees know that he'll give them honest answers about what's going on at the hospital, and they're not afraid to ask—something that has aided morale and reduced the number of rumors. "[Employees] don't have to go home at night and make things up and be distracted by their fears . . . they appreciate that," Jacobs says.

Windber employees have become some of the hospital's best marketing tools says **Lesa Scotnicki**, director of marketing and PR at Windber Medical Center. Because Jacobs has reached out to his employees, they're happier and more likely to recommend the hospital to friends and family. "Because we live in such a close-knit community, word of mouth is the best way to spread the word."

As social media continues to grow, healthcare organizations will use word of mouth more to get their message out to consumers. Although blogging in general is expected to level off or even decline, Johnmar says he thinks that healthcare blogging will continue to increase. His reason for this prediction? The general absence of healthcare corporations and administrators from the current blogosphere—with Jacobs an exception to this rule, of course.

As social media continues to grow, healthcare organizations will use word of mouth more to get their message out to consumers. Although blogging in general is expected to level off or even decline . . . **healthcare blogging will continue to increase.**

Since Jacobs began his blog two years ago, he has been joined by a handful of other hospital CEOs who have started bringing their messages to the blogosphere. Based on the success seen by these few individuals, Johnmar says it is likely that other hospital executives will follow suit.

"Blogging may be peaking in general, but I haven't seen anything that shows healthcare blogging has reached its peak," Johnmar says. "Whether it's more doctors, more patients, or administrators [who begin blogging], there's certainly room to grow." ■

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