The Importance of Social Media in Community Health
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The Importance of Social Media in Community Health

Over the past five years, there has been an explosion in the use of internet access and social media in the United States. With this growth has also come an increased attention to the role of the internet as a source of consumer health information. Whereas in the past individuals may have sought out health information by contacting a health professional, a relative, or a good friend; today they are also reading blogs, checking twitter updates, listening to podcasts, updating their social network profile, and posting comments. Social media is a low-cost and often free media channel that allows health organizations to empower consumers and drive marketing efforts. Today, there are a plethora of health-related resources available online. Social media sites maintained by healthcare providers facilitate the exchange of information from provider to patient, while allowing for peer input on health behaviors and decision-making.

With its increase in popularity, social media has become quite a hot topic in the health and non-profit sectors for organizations of all sizes. What started as a way to reconnect with friends and family has grown into a means for organizations to spread awareness about key issues, build a network of supporters, raise funds, receive real-time consumer feedback, promote events, and create online advocacy campaigns. The Mid-Atlantic Association of Community Health Centers aims to provide its membership with all the necessary tools for building and maintaining a social media initiative. The following document will introduce community health centers to social media tools and highlight the importance of incorporating such tools into their existing communication strategies.
Introduction to Social Media

What is Social Media?

Social media is the integration of media and social communication. It is a collection of online tools that facilitate interaction and communications. Traditional mediums of communication such as television, newspapers, and radio provide a one-way method of delivering a message, whereas social media provides a two-way method; messages can be sent out to an audience and the audience can communicate back with the sender. Information provided through a social media medium is fluid; it can be changed or updated within a matter of seconds. Social media comes in a variety of platforms including blogs, social networks, online communities, bookmarking, and video sharing (see illustration below).

Source: “Going Social: Tapping into Social Media for Nonprofit Success” (Convio, 2010)

Who is Using Social Media?

All generations are taking advantage of social technologies online. While social networks started out among the younger audience, they’ve become more mainstream with the passage of time. Not surprisingly, its audience has become broader and older. This shift has primarily been driven by Facebook whose greatest growth has come from people aged 35-49 years of age. Among adults who regularly go online, 61 percent interact with one another on social networking websites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). A recent Nielsen report shows that two-thirds of the world’s internet population visits a social network or blogging site. In fact, online member communities have overtaken personal e-mail to become the world’s fourth most popular online sector after search, general interest portals, and PC software application (The Nielson Company, 2009).
Why is Social Media Useful for Community Health Centers?

While all medical centers may benefit from effectively using social media, Community Health Centers (CHCs) in particular, are bound to see great results. This is because CHCs provide a range of elective supportive services that could benefit from online expansion, such as assistance with diabetes management, smoking cessation, and nutrition education. Additionally, CHCs have a variety of providers including obstetrician gynecologists, psychologists, pediatricians, and dentists that reach a community of patients who are seen regularly. These providers tend to answer the same questions repeatedly and may need to keep patients notified of new procedures and products. By using a social media platform to express useful information to their patients, CHCs can improve patient satisfaction, loyalty, and health outcomes.

Getting Ready for Health Reform in 2014

As a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), health centers committed to an expansion of services to reach more new patients and to acquire more patients who were uninsured. Under the current health reform law, the government will require most U.S. citizens and legal residents to have health insurance by 2014. It is expected that by 2015, health centers will have doubled their capacity to 40 million patients (NACHC, 2010). With this expansion comes an increased need to reach more patients efficiency and frequently. Social media allows for such type of communication. It has the capacity to empower, engage, and educate both consumers and providers of health care.

Key Benefits of Social Media Use

- Empower patients and individuals to live better, healthier lives.
- Learn what your patients are saying and sharing about your community health center.
- Enable health center advocates to distribute messages about your organization through their social web presence.
- Humanize your health center by not limiting communications to one-way messages and traditional forms of media.
- Increase trust and loyalty from your patients and supporters.
- Facilitate online peer-support.
- Drive traffic to your website.
- Improve your ranking in search engine results by extending your presence onto other sites and building links from those sites back to your own.
- Encourage visitors to make online donations.
- Acquire new contacts and build your e-mail lists.
- Announce new issues as they arise and receive real-time feedback.
**BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE TOP SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS**

**SOCIAL NETWORKS:** Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn  
Social Networks are websites that focus on building engaging social relationships among people. Online connections are made and communities of common interest can be formed.

**BLOGS:** Wordpress, Typepad, Blogger  
Blogs are websites that allow users to easily publish information and share content. Blogs can be used to share personal opinions, advice and recommendations, or factual up-to-date news. Blogs often allow readers to provide feedback and/or start discussions related to the content.

**MICROBLOGS:** Twitter, Tumblr, Plurk  
Microblogs are a shorter form of blogs that allow users to post very short message and hold collaborative conversations in real-time.

**VIDEO SHARING:** YouTube, Vimeo, Blip.tv  
Video sharing websites allow users to post and distribute online video content for others to watch and share. Users can make comments and/or share the content with others by linking the URL to another website.

**PHOTOSHARING:** Flicker, Picasa, PhotoBucket  
Photosharing websites are a place where a person or organization can publicly share photos with others. Photo tagging features allow searchers to find a specific person or relevant content.

**ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS:** Ning, BuddyPress, Jive, Chatter  
Online communities are social networks that focus on a specific audience or topic. Communities are formed around mutual interests or segments of people.

**SOCIAL BOOKMARKING:** Digg, Delicious, StumbleUpon  
Social bookmarking websites make it easy for organizations to collect web pages on topics of interest and share them with their online network of supporters. Similarly, people and organizations can bookmark your site, making it more readily accessible.

**GEOLOCATION LOCATION BASED SERVICES:** Foursquare, Gowalla, Whrrl  
Geolocation applications utilize GPS technology to help online users find friends and discover new places. Users can post reviews and pictures of the shared venues.

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**Empowered Consumers Seek and Share Health Information Online**

*E-patients*

A strong majority (83 percent) of internet users have used the internet to search for health information online, making it the third most popular online activity for adults 18 and older (Zickuhr, 2010). These internet users are known as “e-patients” because of their tendency to use the internet as a health information resource. E-patients enjoy the convenience of being able to seek information anonymously online at any hour. Many say that the resources they find online have a direct effect on the decisions that they make about their health care and their interactions with doctors.
A large majority of e-patients use social media and/or user-generated sites to access health information:

- 41% have read someone else’s commentary or experience about health or medical issues on an online news group, website, or blog.
- 24% have consulted rankings or reviews online of doctors or other providers.
- 24% have consulted rankings or reviews online of hospitals or other medical facilities.
- 19% have signed up to receive updates about health or medical issues.

(Fox & Jones, 2009)

Today’s patients are going online to find information about specific health conditions, where to seek treatment, and how to engage in preventive care. For this reason, it is beneficial for health practitioners to engage in online communities and reach out to their patients via social media. **A strong online presence can greatly impact patient acquisition and retention.**

**Reaching an Extended Audience**

Some may be concerned that their social media efforts will not reach those populations who do not have regular access to the internet via computer. Research shows that social media efforts and online materials reach an audience that extends beyond those who have direct access to the internet. Over half of all online health inquiries (53 percent) are on behalf of someone other than the person typing in the search terms, 43 percent of inquiries are from people who are looking for information for themselves (Ferguson, 2007). Those who are in excellent health often seek material on behalf of family and friends. Those who are in less-than-excellent health are more likely to be hunting for information for themselves. Two-thirds of e-patients talk with someone else about what they find online, most often a friend or spouse (Fox & Jones, 2009).

**Social Media’s Influence on Decision-Making**

In recent years, there has been a turning point in the way that Americans obtain health information. More people are using the internet as a health resource and incorporating online sources into the
search phase of their decision-making process. This means that the influencers within various social media channels can potentially have a significant impact on consumer behavior without having any contact with the individuals that they influence. Social networks are making strong contributions to the way people are becoming informed to make decisions about their health. Today’s most effective public health-driven marketing campaigns use or incorporate social media technologies to amplify awareness, and impact attitudes and health behaviors. Social media has the innate ability to link groups of people together in real time around common issues. In fact, one-third of adults’ access social media related to health and nearly 80 percent of online physicians use social media channels to create, consume, or share medical content (Forrester Research, 2008; Fox & Jones, 2009).

**Changing Trends in the Ways We Communicate**

In an internet-connected society, non-profits and healthcare organizations are increasingly looking for new ways to communicate and receive messages from their audience in accordance with the changing trends and personal preferences of their clients. While e-mail, direct mail, and traditional websites will continue to play an important role in marketing, social media is now widely accepted as the preferred channel of communication. *Organizations risk reaching their full audience potential when they remain limited to the conventional communication channels such as print media, radio communications, and traditional websites.* New supporters will be more challenging to reach if social media is left out of the marketing mix. By incorporating social networking elements into the existing communication efforts, a broader audience can be reached, thus impacting the awareness of the organization and opportunities for involvement.

*Less Time is Being Spent on E-mail*

As the social media trend becomes integrated as a normal part of life for internet users, it’s also becoming the most time-intensive activity on the web. Social networking passed email in terms of time spent in 2007, hitting about 100 billion minutes per month globally. It’s now twice that, and passed email in terms of raw user numbers in July of 2009, with more than 800 million. Given the rate at which Facebook has been growing, that number is probably now closer to a billion (Ingram, 2010).

*Mobile is Emerging as an Access Point to the Internet*

Wireless connections are associated with a deeper engagement in social media and an accelerated pace of information exchange. Those with mobile access to the internet are more likely to contribute their comments and reviews to online community conversations about health and healthcare. Plus, mobile access is on the rise. Forty percent of adults now use the internet, instant messaging, or e-mail with a mobile device (Smith, 2010). Within the next five years, it is predicted that more users will connect to the internet over mobile devices than desktop PCs (Ingram, 2010).

*Serving the Community Health Center Population: Usage Demographics*

*Social Media among Young and Middle-Aged Adults*

According to the health center data from 2009, the largest proportion of patients served at CHCs in both Maryland and Delaware are between the ages of 25 and 44 (HRSA, 2009). According to recent studies, this demographic is also highly engaged in social media.
Community
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internet,
or
access
health
insurance
options
(Becker
et.
al.,
2010).
More
often
these
days,
it
is
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case
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low-income
and
non-white
adults
use
their
cell
phones
as
their
means
of
accessing
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internet
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in
online
activities.
In
fact,
46
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households
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Women and Social Media

Community Health Centers in Maryland and Delaware serve a significantly larger proportion of women than men. In 2009, 61.5 percent of Maryland’s health center patients and 62.4 percent of Delaware’s Health Center patients were female (HRSA, 2009). Women make approximately 80 percent of health care decisions for their families (Department of Labor, 2009). Therefore, it makes logical sense to invest in media and communication efforts that reach out to the female audience. Social networks can be used as a vehicle of information for such a population. Social networking sites reach a higher percentage of women than men, and women spend significantly more time on social networking sites than men (Abraham, Morn, & Vollman, 2010). Additionally, in a demographic view of social networking activity on mobile devices, women were found to use their phones to access Twitter and Facebook more than men (The Nielson Company, 2009).

Access to Social Media within Low-Income Populations

Internet access among low-income populations has long been held as an issue of concern. This concern is based on the myth that members of low-income populations have very little access to the internet on a regular basis. Such thinking fuels the belief that online social media efforts will not reach a large portion of Health Center patients. Although this may be true for some patients, a large number of this population has found a means to connect online. A 2007 study on internet access issues among WIC participants found that 52 percent – 95 percent have “easy access” (defined as access from home, work, parent’s home, or friend's home) to the internet (Bensley, et.al., 2007). The public library is also an option for those seeking free access to the internet. A 2009 study found that 44 percent of people living in households below the poverty line have used their local public libraries to access the Internet. Thirty-seven percent of these users went to the library to research medical conditions, find a health care provider, or access health insurance options (Becker et. al., 2010). More often these days, it is the case that low-income and non-white adults use their cell phones as their means of accessing the internet and engaging in online activities. In fact, 46 percent of households earning less than $30,000 a year said they

- Adults between the ages of 18 and 49 are more likely than older adults to participate in social technologies related to health (Fox & Jones, 2009).
- 18 to 29 year olds are significantly more likely than those in older age groups to engage in social mobile data applications including accessing the internet, sending or receiving e-mail, accessing a social network, or using an update service such as twitter from their phone (Smith, 2010).
- 15% of 18 to 29 year olds have software applications or “apps” on their phones that help them track or manage their health (Fox, 2010).
- 70% of people who use a mobile device to access a social network are between 25 and 54 years of age (The Nielson Company, 2009).
used data services on wireless mobile devices to access the internet (Smith, 2010). Mobile internet use is becoming the norm and is increasingly taking on the functions once served by desktops and laptops.

**Social Media within African-American and Latino Populations**

The Community Health Centers in both Maryland and Delaware serve a large racial/ethnic minority population. In 2009, 53.5 percent of all Maryland Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) patients self-identified themselves as Black/African-American and 11.2 percent of patients self-identified with Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. In Delaware, 48.6 percent of patients self-identified as Black/African-American and 43.9 percent self-identified with Hispanic/Latino as their ethnicity. There is a strong potential that communication efforts that incorporate social media could have a great impact on these minority communities. Take Twitter for example, it has become disproportionately popular among African-Americans. Although African-Americans only make up 13 percent of the U.S. population, they make up 25 percent of all Twitter users (Webster, 2010). Additionally, African-Americans and Latinos are more likely than the general population to access the internet by cellular phones, and they use their phones more often to access data applications. Fifty-one percent of Hispanics and 46 percent of African-Americans use their phones to access the Internet, compared with 33 percent of Whites, according to a 2010 Pew Research Center survey. The figures for using social networks like Facebook via phone were 36 percent for Latinos, 33 percent for African-Americans, and 19 percent for Whites (Smith, 2010).

**Consider the Investment**

A 2010 case study analysis by Idealware found that a number of non-profits are finding success with social media. More than half of those investing time in these tools saw real results beyond simple “fans” or “followers,” like an increase in website traffic, substantive feedback, or new volunteers (Quinn & Berry, 2010). Incorporating a social media platform into your existing communication efforts is not simply about making “friends” or posting pictures, it’s about creating online communities, building loyalty, establishing trust, driving action, building awareness, and engaging with your patients.

For medical professionals, social media is another way to strengthen the doctor-patient relationship because patients are provided with ongoing news, office updates, health tips, and advice. Health center staff benefit because patients are more informed and less inclined to call into the office for basic and routine information. Online communities provide a prime opportunity for Health Centers to get to know their patients more intimately and remain aware of their health needs and behaviors. Giving patients a space to create online communities based on chronic conditions such as diabetes, HIV/AIDS, asthma, or arthritis allows for patient empowerment. Such empowerment contributes to improved health outcomes. Furthermore, a stronger online presence will attract new patients to your health center.

Some of the benefits of social media are immediate, and some will come from a strong commitment of involvement, but what’s in store for health centers is on the horizon as social platforms, applications, and online communities continue to evolve. Now is the time to get engaged. Real-time, relationship-building communication platforms represent the future of communication.

**Local Examples of Social Media Use in Healthcare:**

To further demonstrate the ways in which social media tools are being used in the healthcare field, two case studies are illustrated below. These are examples of the social media efforts from two local health
organizations: the University of Maryland Medical Center, a hospital located in Baltimore and the Whitman-Walker Clinic, a Federally Qualified Health Center located in Washington, D.C.

**The University of Maryland Medical Center**

The University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC) in Baltimore, Maryland is an innovative teaching hospital that provides health care to people throughout Maryland and the Mid-Atlantic region. UMMC has decided to engage with its supporters and patient community through a variety of social media efforts. These currently include a Facebook page, 11 Twitter sites, a YouTube channel, a Blog, an iPhone app and 2 podcasts. The following details the use of each of these platforms:

**University of Maryland Medical Center on Facebook**

In January 2011, there were more than 7,840 individuals who had selected that they “liked” UMMC’s Facebook page. This is the amount of people who have chosen to associate themselves with UMMC on Facebook. UMMC has decided to use their Facebook wall for a variety of messages ranging from personal patient success stories to new developments in medicine. Approximately 2 to 5 different messages are posted each day. These messages have the potential to show up on the newsfeeds of each of the people who “liked” the UMMC page.

The tabs on the UMMC Facebook page include a discussion section, links to other UMMC social media platforms, health-related polls, notes, events, photos, an invite tab to invite friends to the UMMC Facebook page, and a link to the UMMC Ask the Expert page. Ask the Expert is a free feature that connects people with University of Maryland Medical Center and School of Medicine physicians who can answer questions online about a wide variety of health-related topics. This feature is for informational purposes only. UMMC doctors cannot provide a diagnosis or referrals to other doctors through this online service. UMMC keeps an archive of previously asked questions and answers on the Ask the Expert site so that others may learn from past inquires.
UMMC maintains an official Twitter account, but has also decided to build and maintain ten other Twitter accounts in order to target and reach out to specific audiences. The other accounts reach a variety of communities. Topics include pediatrics, heart health, robotic surgery, weight loss, women’s health, shock trauma, and orthopedics. The official account has over 5,800 followers. A large number of the posted messages or “tweets” are re-tweets from the other UMMC twitter accounts. However, many of the tweets are directly from the official UMMC account and include messages about the center, health facts, or links to health-related articles.
The UMMC videos on YouTube include interviews with UMMC experts, patient success stories, surgical Webcasts, and overviews of available programs and services.

Life in a Medical Center: The Blog of University of Maryland Medical Center

Life in a Medical Center is a place where employees, patients, and friends of UMMC can share their stories, tips, and hospital experiences, and where people can come for practical health tips and advice. The blog encourages the community to participate by sharing their comments, thoughts, and ideas. UMMC considers this blog to be the centerpiece of its social media efforts.

University of Maryland Medical Center iPhone Application

On July 21, 2009, UMMC launched an iPhone app called the UMMC Medical Encyclopedia. It is available free from the Apple iPhone Store or iTunes. On their website, UMMC announced that the app has been downloaded about 1,500 times a day from more than 50 countries. It includes 50,000 pages of medically reviewed information in both English and Spanish. As an added feature, users have the ability to ask questions directly to one of UMMC’s physicians on a number of specialized topics.

University of Maryland Medical Center Podcasts

UMMC has two podcasts available, Medically Speaking (audio) and Maryland Health Today (video). New episodes of each podcast are released every other Monday.

Medically Speaking podcasts are informative discussions with medical experts, providing listeners with the latest information on
diagnosing, treating, and preventing a variety of health problems so that they can become better health care consumers. Each podcast covers a specific health topic and features an interview with a top specialist.

Maryland Health Today is a half-hour program featuring in-depth interviews of doctors and researchers from the University of Maryland Medical Center and University of Maryland School of Medicine.

From Facebook to Podcasts, the University of Maryland Medical Center has fully embraced the use of social media tools to effectively communicate and interact with its community of physicians, patients, and supporters.

**THE WHITMAN-WALKER CLINIC**

Whitman-Walker Clinic (WWC) is a community-based provider of health care in Washington, DC. Offered services include primary medical and dental care; mental health and addictions counseling and treatment; HIV education, prevention, and testing; legal services; and medical adherence case management. Whitman-Walker Clinic is committed to meeting the health needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community and people living with HIV/AIDS. As a part of their social media efforts, WWC has established a Facebook page, a YouTube channel, a Twitter site, and accounts on Flickr and foursquare.

*Whitman Walker Clinic on Facebook*

Currently, over 960 people have chosen to “like” the Whitman-Walker Clinic on Facebook. The clinic posts an average of three messages per day on its Facebook wall with many of the topics addressing HIV/AIDS, LGBT health care, STD treatment, and group counseling. The tabs on the WWC Facebook page include links to health-related articles, notes, events, photos, and videos.
Whitman-Walker Clinic on YouTube

The WWC videos include a variety of public service announcements, WWC advertisements that aired via Comcast networks and movie theaters in the District, and coverage of previous community events.

Whitman-Walker Clinic on Twitter

WWC posts multiple tweets a day. Many of the tweets refer to the services that are offered at the WWC sites. The clinic also tweets about health articles that may be of interest to the LGBT and HIV/AIDS community. The WWC Twitter account has over 610 followers.