



Using Social Networking

To Engage the Healthcare Consumer

BY BARRY P. CHAIKEN, MD



E-mail is so 20th Century!

Now people connect through text messaging applications such as Twitter or on social networking sites such as Facebook. They continue to communicate and exchange information asynchronously as before, but at a faster pace that is much closer to real time. Viral no longer refers to a small piece of genetic code that gives you the sniffles. It now describes the explosive distribution of information through an unregulated, “Wild West” technology platform commonly known as the Web 2.0 Internet.

A small snippet of information posted on a blog or YouTube can be shared with millions of people within hours, using a distribution engine powered by the information consumers themselves. Many more Americans saw Tina Fey’s now classic impersonation of Governor Sarah Palin on YouTube than live on the television program Saturday Night Live. The link to the video was widely exchanged in blogs, Tweets, and postings on MySpace. Consumers saw the video clip on laptops, PDAs, and mobile phones.

Before the introduction of Web 2.0 social networking tools, consumers mostly obtained their information from controlled information outlets such as news organizations, corporate public relations departments, industry associations, and consumer reporting agencies (e.g., Consumer Reports®). Today these organizations only supplement the much larger review information and commentaries posted by active participants in the online world.

Reviews You Can Use

For example, the website Trip Advisor® (www.tripadvisor.com) allows travelers to post reviews of hotels including personal digital photos of the accommodations. Travelers no longer need to rely upon glossy brochures or hotel web sites that show the facility in its best light. Consumers, using social networking web sites such as Trip Advisor, consider multiple reviews of the hotel posted by a broad range of travelers, some just like them.

Unbiased and willing to share their experiences, these travelers reduce the hotel's influence and control over its own reputation and brand message. The hotel is subject to the unfiltered commentary provided by its guests. Although some hotels generate fake reviews to boost their image, the number of real reviews posted often overwhelms these fake reviews.

Threatened loss of control of its reputation and brand creates great worry among organization leaders. Healthcare entities, physicians, and other members of the healthcare community work hard to develop and maintain reputations to ensure ongoing revenue through continued referrals. Widely publicized catastrophic medical errors, or reports of poor quality, can lead to collapsed care programs as patients and payors switch to other institutions.

Small Events Can Yield Big Impact

Before online social networking, only news of the most serious events reached large numbers of consum-

ers. Less sensational events did not have the impact necessary to attract the attention of the mass media, the only effective distributor of information to large numbers of consumers previously available.

All of this has changed. Now consumers record even minor events and place them unfiltered in cyberspace for review by anyone at anytime. This "raw" information lacks any degree of checking of its accuracy, relevance, or completeness. Both factual and inaccurate stories are posted side by side communicating an unscripted image of an institution, group practice, or individual physician.

Consumers with similar experiences are also able to comment on postings, thereby adding credibility or contradiction to any story. Additionally, those mentioned in the postings can add further details or information to "correct" or enhance the story. Each posted story offers a forum for give and take allowing all interested consumers to express their own facts or opinions. Consumers effortlessly share postings with others, therefore encouraging more people to contribute.

When such online collaboration attains a level of momentum where thousands and thousands of online users consume the content and then forward or contribute to it, the content is described as having gone viral. Although a relatively rare occurrence for any single piece of content, information goes viral regularly in cyberspace. Jokes, urban legends, and videos are examples of frequent "gone viral" content.

Organizations that fail to understand the influence

TYPES OF ONLINE PARTICIPANTS

Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, both analysts at Forrester Research, categorized online participants in their recently published book Groundswell. The six types of online participants include:

Creators	Critics	Collectors	Joiners	Spectators	Inactives
The most active, sophisticated users of social networking applications, these online consumers at least once per month publish a blog or article online, maintain a web page, or upload videos or audio to sites like YouTube. Based on a 2007 survey, in the U.S. Creators represent 18% of the online adult population, in Europe just 20%, and in South Korea 28%.	These online adults react to online content posted by others by posting comments on blogs or online forums, posting ratings or reviews, or editing wikis. There are many more Critics than Creators, encompassing 25% of US online adults, 20% of Europeans, and 36% of Japanese.	Acting to collect or aggregate information, these online participants save URLs and place tags on social-bookmarking services like del.icio.us, vote for sites on a service like Digg, or use RSS feeds on services like Google Reader. This effort works to help organize the tremendous amount of information placed on the Web by Creators and Critics. About 10% of adult Americans and Europeans are Collectors.	These are the adults who participate in or maintain profiles on social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, or LinkedIn. More than 25% of American adults are Joiners with levels above 40% for South Koreans. Joiners make up about 10% of online adults in Europe.	Consumers of what others produce on the Web, little effort is required of Spectators to participate. These adults read blogs, forums, reviews, watch videos, and listen to podcasts. Since being a Spectator requires so little effort compared to the other types, it makes up the largest group of online participants. About 48% of Americans, 37% of Europeans, and two-thirds of Japanese adults are described as Spectators.	These are the adults who participate in or maintain profiles on social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, or LinkedIn. More than 25% of American adults are Joiners with levels above 40% for South Koreans. Joiners make up about 10% of online adults in Europe.

56% of American adults are active participants in online social interaction.

of online consumers in their strategic and operational planning will surely be blindsided by some unanticipated event and will be completely unprepared on how to respond. In addition, such organizations are missing an opportunity to engage proactively these online consumers. Actively working with these savvy online users, while providing them with a social networking forum to express themselves, greatly assists in any effort to enhance business models, improve service offerings, and publicize success.

Opportunities for Healthcare Providers

Rather than a threat, social networks offer healthcare organizations a new tool to connect with healthcare consumers. As consumerism continues to take hold and consumer directed health plans become more commonplace, organizations need to remain in constant communication with the patients they serve to keep those individuals loyal to their facility or practice. Social networks allow for multifaceted, regular communication with healthcare consumers that assists in building and maintaining this necessary loyalty. As consumer control over the spending of their healthcare dollars increases, their behaviors will more closely mimic their behavior in purchasing other products and services. Therefore, effective management of an organization's online presence greatly influences financial success.

According to Li and Bernhoff, successful strategies for entering this online world rely upon using an organization's online presence to achieve one of five objectives:

» **Listening** - To better understand customers and to conduct market research; valuable for use in marketing and development. Example – A hospital is considering opening an ambulatory clinic, open nights and weekends, in response to the recent dedication of a clinic at the local Wal-Mart.

» **Talking** - To spread messages about your organization; valuable when expanding online marketing initiatives to a more interactive level. Example – A cosmetic surgeon considers offering a new anti-wrinkle skin therapy just approved by the FDA that has some side effects, and she needs to understand how customers perceive the complication risk.

» **Energizing** - To identify enthusiastic consumers and spread their enthusiasm and good words to others; valuable if a brand has passionate followers. Example – A surgical urology group developed a new procedure for performing prostatectomies that delivers fewer side effects, and the group wants to publicize its successes so other patients will seek out the group for treatment.

» **Supporting** - To assist consumers in helping each other; valuable for organizations with high support costs or where there is a natural affinity for people to support each other. Example – Believing that group interaction is critical to successful blood glucose control, a diabetes treatment center wants to link its patients so they can better assist each other in the self-care of their chronic disease.

» **Embracing** - To integrate consumers into a business including the design of products and services; the most challenging objective of those noted here and usually pursued after achieving success utilizing one of the previous four. Example – An academic medical center, recognizing the growth of consumerism in healthcare and the shift in reimbursement patterns wants to engage its community of patients in the planning for the future expansion of services and facilities.

For any organization, engaging consumers utilizing the online world of social networking presents a difficult but manageable challenge. Experience in other industries highlights the enormous benefits and competitive advantage a successful strategy can deliver.

For the healthcare industry, the upside should prove to be even greater. After all, no industry encompasses services and products that exceed the emotional energy of the patient-caregiver relationship. By constructively interacting with consumers in the online world through social networking, healthcare organizations are likely to find a motivated consumer who passionately works to enhance the quality and safety of care delivered to themselves, their family, and their community. ♦

Barry Chaiken is on the healthcare advisory board of Evolent Technologies and Chief Medical Officer of his own firm DocsNetwork, Ltd. He writes a regular column and serves as a member of the Editorial Advisory Board for Patient Safety & Quality Healthcare. With more than 20 years of experience in medical research, epidemiology, clinical information technology, and patient safety, Chaiken is board certified in general preventive medicine and public health and is a Fellow, Board Member, and Chair-Elect of HIMSS. He has worked on quality improvement studies, health IT clinical transformation projects, and clinical investigations for the National Institutes of Health, U.K. National Health Service, and Boston University Medical School. Chaiken also serves as an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Public Health and Family Medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine. He may be contacted at bchaiken@docsnetwork.com.