A Guide to Social Media for the Physician Practice

Kerry Ann Hayon, MHA, Talia Goldsmith, MHA, and Lindsay Garito, MPH

This guide will discuss how social media is used by both physicians and patients, describe the frequent concerns physicians may have regarding social media use, and recommend actions physicians can take to maintain a positive professional online presence.
About the Authors

Kerry Ann Hayon, MHA
Manager, Physician Practice Resource Center, Massachusetts Medical Society
Kerry Ann Hayon is the Manager of the Physician Practice Resource Center (PPRC) at the Massachusetts Medical Society. She brings more than 10 years of consulting, hospital administration, and physician practice management experience to the PPRC. Kerry Ann is a Six-Sigma process improvement expert with extensive experience working with physicians and physician practices in the areas of strategy, operations, program development, and revenue cycle enhancement. She focuses on providing practical solutions for physician practices in light of the current health care environment. Kerry Ann holds a Masters in Healthcare Administration from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and is an NCQA Certified Patient-Centered Medical Home Content Expert.

Talia Goldsmith, MHA
Advisor, Physician Practice Solutions, Massachusetts Medical Society
Talia Goldsmith is an advisor for physician practice solutions at the Massachusetts Medical Society. Since joining the MMS in 2011, Talia has assisted numerous physicians and practices on a broad range of issues, including state and federal legislative and regulatory requirements, billing and reimbursement, practice management and operations issues, staff training and development, and education on emerging trends in the health care environment. She has experience working with large academic medical centers, community hospitals, and both large and small physician practices. Talia earned her Masters in Healthcare Administration at Suffolk University Sawyer Business School prior to joining the Massachusetts Medical Society and is a Certified Patient-Centered Medical Home Content Expert by the National Committee on Quality Assurance.

Lindsay Garito, MPH, CPH
Health Policy Analyst, Massachusetts Medical Society
Lindsay Garito is a Health Policy Analyst in the Department of Health Policy at the Massachusetts Medical Society. Prior to joining the MMS, Lindsay earned a Master of Public Health degree in Health Management and Policy from Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA, and is certified in Public Health by the National Board of Public Health Examiners. Lindsay’s current research focus is on health care reform policies implemented at the state and national level, and the impact that these policies have on the physician practice environment and the delivery of care.

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The information in this booklet is intended to serve as a general resource and guide. It is not to be construed as legal advice.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven Practical Suggestions for Engaging in Social Media</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Social Media</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Areas of Impact on Physician Practices</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Are you considering engaging in social media either for yourself or on behalf of your medical practice? If so, there are a number of things to think about before determining the best course of action for engaging in social media — personally and/or professionally.

Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Yelp, and others have gained widespread popularity over the past few years. More than 70 percent of adults in the United States use at least one social networking site,1 and almost half of all adults using social networking sites use more than one.2 The gain in popularity of social media has made it easier than ever for businesses — including physician practices — to leverage the attention of a larger audience more easily than in the past in terms of marketing, brand awareness, promotion of products and services, and knowledge and information share. While social media may present an opportunity for physician practices, there are risks and challenges that should also be considered. This guide will explore the risks and challenges while providing practical considerations for physicians and physician practices who may be interested in engaging in social media.

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1 Aaron Smith, “72% of Online Adults Are Social Networking Site Users,” Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, August 5, 2013, www.pewinternet.org/2013/08/05/72-of-online-adults-are-social-networking-site-users.

Seven Practical Suggestions for Engaging in Social Media

Without a doubt there are a lot of components to think about when determining whether you or your practice should engage in social media. Given that engaging in online activity is widespread, physicians and practices should not fear engaging in social media, but instead plan to engage in it strategically and thoughtfully. A little thought, planning, and consideration of the following suggestions can help you successfully engage in social media while maintaining a positive online and professional reputation, respecting personal and patient confidentiality and maintaining a good reputation with patients and colleagues. Seven key suggestions include the following:

1. **Maintain privacy.** Maintain patient confidentiality at all costs. Keep security settings high and be thoughtful about who you “friend” or share your personal information with.
2. **Consider separate professional and personal profiles.** Separating personal and professional online profiles with high security and controlled “friending” may be a good idea in order to control your messaging and various forms of relationships.
3. **De-identify patient information and preserve patient privacy.** Whether sharing medical condition stories on your personal or professional profile, de-identifying patient information, maintaining patient confidentiality, and watching for overshare of information that could violate patient privacy is paramount.
4. **Consider the information you are sharing.** Think about what you are posting in a social media environment. Is this something you would share in a conversation with patients in the office? Is it something you would talk to your colleagues about? If you would not have a professional conversation about this topic, then it most likely is not a good idea to be dialoguing about it online.
5. **Control your photos.** Exercise extreme caution about posting photos on both personal and professional profiles. What are you posting, and is it a patient privacy threat in any way?
6. **Have a physician practice tactical/strategic plan for engaging in social media.** Determine what your goal is, what you hope to accomplish, and what steps you need to take. Having a strategy will help create a roadmap and provide direction into what posts make sense and what might not meet the overall strategy for a physician or for the practice at large.
7. **Err on the side of caution.** If a particular behavior, conversation or post wouldn’t feel right during an in-person encounter, then it probably won’t work in an online encounter regardless of whether you are sharing the information on your personal or professional profile.
Defining Social Media

Social media refers to the platforms that enable individuals and communities to gather, communicate, and share information, experiences, and personal stories through the use of computers, smartphones, or other electronic devices. Similar to in-person, real-world friendships and interactions, social media users may group together based on similar interests or experiences. In the early years of the Internet, the flow of information was one-way; information started at a source and flowed out to users without opportunities for interaction. Today, social media encourages collaboration and allows individuals to participate and share information with one another, regardless of geographic location.

Social media makes it possible to share information that can quickly reach a large audience, while leaving behind a permanent record of user activity. One of the major impacts of social media is that the boundaries between what is considered public information and what is considered private — or professional and personal — can often be vague. One example of this vagueness includes a physician who shares an interesting case, which he saw earlier in the day, on his practice’s Facebook page, thinking that other physicians who follow the practice’s Facebook updates will find it interesting and educational. However, the patient, who also happens to follow the practice’s Facebook page, discovers that his or her case has been made public and feels that his or her privacy has been violated. Another example of this involves a physician who routinely posts pictures of himself with a drink in hand. Other physicians see these posts and question whether he is suitable to provide care for his patients, as based on the pictures, it appears that he might have a drinking problem. The delineation between public and private is often blurred and can be hard to discern given the permanent record and trail left behind during online interactions.

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Key Areas of Impact on Physician Practices

The widespread adoption of social media in the United States has permeated the health care delivery landscape in both clinical and non-clinical settings, with increased utilization on behalf of physicians, physician practices, and patients.

Access to Health-related Information

Social media has been useful to patients who seek health-related information as it becomes available. There are online forums for patients with chronic diseases, “crowdsourcing” for health-related information, and platforms for providing feedback on health care experiences across settings. While in some cases increased access to information has led to informed patients, there are many examples in the literature where patients refer to incorrect information or have wanted their physicians to prescribe a drug or course of treatment based on incorrect information they had read online. Sometimes this may be helpful, but in other cases, the physician may need to educate a patient on why that treatment or care option differs from their clinical assessment.

Social media has created opportunities for dialogue and has empowered patients by providing them with access to a wealth of information, including access to a network of other patients with similar conditions. In that same respect, patients now have a source of medical and health information that is not directly provided by their physicians and, as such, this information may not be the most appropriate depending on the situation.
Social Media-driven Marketing Initiatives

As mentioned, many businesses, including health care organizations and physician practices, have started using social media as a way to promote their services and build rapport and brand recognition with potential customers. The physician community has also started using social media platforms, such as blogs, as a means to connect with patients and the general public. Physicians may choose to share experiences from their perspective or examples of the type of conditions where they demonstrate a particular clinical expertise. For example, one practice that specializes in caring for diabetic patients frequently updates its Facebook page with information on the latest treatment trends and news in diabetic care, and shares links to healthy nutrition resources and recipes. This type of information share may help in growing a patient panel. Patients may find the information shared or approach to care delivery useful in building a connection with the physician or practice and may be more likely to seek care with the provider. This type of activity can also serve as an effective and efficient method for physicians to stay current and share medical knowledge with other physicians in the medical community, with the added benefit of sparking referrals from other physicians who may not be aware of a particular provider’s interests or expertise.

Emergence of Physician Review Sites

Patients are increasingly using review sites that are specific to the medical profession (e.g., HealthGrades, Vitals, or Zoc Doc), as well as others that offer the ability to review a variety of services or businesses, such as Yelp or Angie’s List. Online review sites have empowered patients to speak up and share their health care experiences with the online community. In this case, social media has served as a mechanism for involving patients in the health care conversation. The ability of patients to share their own health care experiences about individual providers or organizations across a community of social network users can significantly impact a physician’s practice. Negative reviews can result in patients leaving the practice or potential patients seeking care elsewhere, while positive reviews can result in an influx of demand.


“Understanding the Factors That Influence the Adoption and Meaningful Use of Social Media by Physicians to Share Medical Information,” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 14, no. 5 (September 24, 2012), doi:10.2196/jmir.2138.
The presence of negative reviews on these sites is rapidly becoming a key concern for physicians and physician practices. The largest frustration with these review sites is that the data is largely based on anecdotal or situational stories, and there is little that a physician or physician practice can do to change, control, or manage these reviews. Unfortunately, current online review sites have many flaws, the most notable being that they are not standardized and they allow patients to review a physician based on numerous qualities that are subjective and difficult to compare across physicians. In addition, many of these sites offer reviews largely based on how a patient felt at a particular point in time and are anecdotal in nature. Without reading the detail of the review, the overall rating can be misleading. A physician's score may seem low at first glance, but given that the current number of physician-related reviews is relatively low when compared to the total number of physicians practicing (approximately one in six), further analysis may show that the score represents only one reviewer who rated the provider negatively, thus leaving an inquiring patient with a false impression.

Use of online review sites is on the rise, and while physicians are becoming increasingly concerned, research indicates that most of the reviews on a given site are positive. The majority of patients find rating sites only “somewhat important” and instead find other factors, such as word-of-mouth from friends and family members and type of insurance accepted, to be more important. Physicians who may receive negative reviews online should consider how they wish to respond to the review. In some instances, physicians have sued patients; however, the outcomes have drawn additional undesirable attention to the physicians. One way to counteract a negative rating is to encourage the number of positive reviews, thus outweighing the number of negative reviews on a given site.

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The Changing Dynamic of Patient Care Boundaries

Physicians have always had to create and maintain boundaries in terms of what is appropriate to share with patients about their personal life, stories of care of other patients, or other types of information that do not directly relate to the patient; however, only since social media has been widely adopted have physicians had to maintain boundaries in situations that occur regularly outside the office. When people have the ability to search for information about a physician and have the ability to access information on LinkedIn, Facebook, or other social media platforms, something that happens outside of work can now carry over into professional life. Social media has made information not normally disclosed in a patient-physician interaction more readily available to a potentially unlimited number of individuals.\(^1\)

Traditionally, physicians have been the only sources of validated medical information that patients have had access to, which is why establishing trust and a strong physician-patient relationship is essential.\(^2\) Physicians need to maintain a professional image both in person and online in order to preserve their doctor-patient relationship and professional credibility, for themselves and for the entire medical profession. Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, make details of personal life more readily available and searchable than ever before. Given the public nature of social media, all professionals have to proceed with caution and consider the content before posting in order to be sure that they are not sharing information that is inappropriate or saying something that would jeopardize their professional credibility. Social media makes the boundaries less defined, so it is extremely important that physicians engage in its use with a thoughtful and cautious approach.

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Maintaining a Professional Online Presence

It is extremely important for physicians to maintain an online presence that is seen as professional. Patients must know that their physician and medical team are going to respect their privacy, be competent in identifying and recommending the appropriate treatment options, and will understand their specific patient needs.

The characteristics of the medical profession and social media, coupled with a lack of widely accepted guidelines or best practices on social media use for physicians, create a challenge for those looking to engage in social media platforms. When considering creating an online presence, there are a few key things physicians and physician practices should keep in mind:

» Exposure of Private Information

Revealing inappropriate or personal patient information and blurring the boundaries between physician-patient relationships are extremely important to think about. How physicians choose to protect their own privacy and the privacy of patient information while online may have a significant impact on their reputation and the reputation of their colleagues.

The increase in communication between physicians and patients, as a result of widespread social media adoption, opens the door to potential exposure of protected patient information. More than half of a sample of blogs written by health care professionals had enough information to reveal the authors’ identities or for patients to identify themselves based on the shared content.14 Knowing a provider may share a patient’s personal health information with an audience may affect how much and what kind of information the patient feels comfortable sharing with their physician, potentially impacting the care that patient receives significantly and/or negatively.

A privacy breach of this nature can have damaging and irreparable consequences for both the patient and the physician. Physicians may frequently be faced with situations in which patients would like to engage with them in an online relationship (be a Facebook “friend”, a LinkedIn “connection”, or “contact”,

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14Lagu et al., “Content of Weblogs Written by Health Professionals.”
Engaging in an online relationship with a patient blurs the doctor-patient boundaries, and as mentioned previously, research recommends that physicians maintain separate online identities for their personal and professional lives to avoid inappropriate information being shared.\textsuperscript{15}

Other research indicates that it may be wise for a physician to completely avoid the opportunity to connect and share personal information with patients online by denying or ignoring patient friend requests.\textsuperscript{16} Maintaining online “friendships” with patients not only opens the door to potential physician privacy breaches, but it also makes additional patient information available to physicians that they may not normally be privy to. Patients may report not being heavy drinkers or smokers when in an office exam, but they may post pictures of themselves engaging in these activities. In these situations, a physician may be inclined to add information gathered online to their patients’ medical records; however, this may be considered a violation of patient privacy.

Since it is essential for physicians to conduct themselves appropriately and maintain a positive and professional image, it is important for physicians to be aware of what information they share with the greater online community. Although many social media applications have privacy settings, information that is shared on the Internet can be replicated and stored without the original users’ awareness. Patients and other individuals or groups could potentially access information about where a physician lives, what their marital status is, what their sexual

\textsuperscript{15}Muhlen and Ohno-Machado, “Reviewing Social Media Use by Clinicians.”
orientation is, and so on, simply by investigating information available online. It is essential for physicians to safeguard private information by refraining from disclosing private information in online outlets.

» Reputation Concerns

A failure to maintain good online privacy habits — personally and professionally — can result in threats to physician credibility and damage to the physician’s reputation and the physician practice. There have been examples of a physician’s reputation being negatively impacted from activities such as inappropriately sharing pictures of patients while on medical missions in other countries; in these instances, the original intentions may have been clinical in nature, but these actions were seen by a larger audience and interpreted as a violation of patient privacy. Another example of non-clinical behavior that can impact a physician’s reputation includes a physician sharing photos of him or herself on social media applications depicting behavior that can be perceived as unprofessional. This behavior not only damages the credibility of the individual physician and the physician practice, but also reflects on the profession of medicine as a whole, as it questions the physician’s ability to exercise sound judgment.

Current Guidelines for Social Media Use by Physicians

Due to the rapidly changing nature of technology, the Internet, and social media, it is difficult to develop guidelines or instructions that will address every situation that may arise. Challenges exist in teaching social media best practices because guidelines and widely accepted practices quickly become obsolete due to constant change and introduction of new websites or technologies17.

17Hogan and Quan-Haase, “Persistence and Change in Social Media.”
The Massachusetts Medical Society has adopted *Guidelines for Physicians Who Choose to Engage in the Professional Use of Social Media*, which focus on maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, maintaining professional ethical guidelines, and using enhanced privacy settings. The document also highlights the importance of social media and patient education and the professional responsibility of physicians to participate in those conversations. The Massachusetts Medical Society’s Guidelines can be found in Appendix 1 on page 12.

The AMA has also issued guidelines for the non-clinical use of social media sites by physicians and medical students/residents. The guidelines were primarily issued in response to a variety of incidents that threatened the physician-patient relationship or reflected poorly on the medical profession as a whole. The guidelines reflect certain characteristics of social media: namely, that records endure for long periods of time, the Internet fosters a lack of inhibition and feelings of anonymity, and messages can reach a large audience. The AMA’s position is that physicians and medical students should incorporate the same ethical standards that they exercise during in-person interactions to all interactions online and in other settings. A summary of the American Medical Association’s recommendations can be found in Appendix 2 on page 13.

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18 American Medical Association, “Professionalism in the Use of Social Media.”

19 Ibid.
Massachusetts Medical Society Guidelines for Physicians Who Choose to Engage in the Professional Use of Social Media

Carefully planned and professionally executed participation in social media by physicians is professionally appropriate, and can be an effective method to connect with colleagues, advance professional expertise, educate patients, and enhance the public profile and reputation of our profession.

Physicians should be cognizant of standards of patient privacy and confidentiality that must be maintained in all environments, including online, and must not post identifiable patient information online.

When using the Internet for social networking, physicians should use privacy settings to safeguard personal information and content to the extent possible, but should realize that privacy settings are not absolute and that once on the Internet, it is highly likely that content will remain there indefinitely. Thus, physicians should routinely monitor their own Internet presence to ensure that the personal and professional information on their own sites and, to the extent possible, content posted about them by others, is accurate and appropriate.

If they interact with patients on the Internet, physicians must maintain appropriate boundaries of the patient-physician relationship in accordance with professional ethical guidelines, just as they would in any other context.

To maintain appropriate professional boundaries, it is recommended that physicians separate personal and professional content online. Physicians should accept patient online invitations to connect only on a physician's professional social networking site, and should not accept invitations from patients to connect on personal networking sites.

Physicians’ existing professional responsibility to hold their colleagues to account for maintaining the profession’s code of ethics extends to behavior in online communities. Thus, when physicians see content posted by colleagues that appears unprofessional, they have a responsibility to bring that content to the attention of the individual, so that he or she can remove it and/or take other appropriate actions. If the behavior significantly violates professional norms and the individual does not take appropriate action to resolve the situation, the physician should report the matter to the appropriate authorities.

Physicians must disclose all financial or other material relationships they have with regard to the maker or provider of products and services they review or discuss in online communities. This includes discussions and reviews of products and services provided to the physician for free.

Physicians must recognize that online content can have a significant impact on public trust in the medical profession, both positively and negatively. The content that physicians post online may also influence their reputations among patients and colleagues, and may have consequences for their medical careers, particularly for physicians-in-training and medical students.
Appendix 2

| American Medical Association Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs |
| Recommendations for Maintaining an Online Presence³⁰ |

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Physicians must recognize the actions online and content posted may negatively affect the reputations among patients and colleagues, may have consequences for their medical careers (particularly for physicians-in-training and medical students), and can undermine public trust of the medical profession.

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