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Before getting started, it’s important for hospitals and health systems to set clear objectives for the social media program. The objectives should align with the organization’s mission and vision. Another key step is determining who can respond on behalf of the organization, as well as establish response protocols. Social media is a form of two-way communication and patients should receive responses in a timely manner.

Social media can also serve as an effective means of communication during a crisis. During an on-campus shooting in November, Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin posted updates on Facebook and Twitter to alert the public and employees about the situation. The organization posted announcements that the facility was on lockdown and released statements from the chief executive and chief medical officers.

“Social media enabled us to get the message out faster,” says Neal Linkon, director of interactive marketing for the Milwaukee organization. “It was very effective.”

Love it or hate it, Facebook is no longer a platform that your hospital can ignore. The reason is simple and follows the old marketing adage: Go where the customers are. Patients and families turn to the Internet for health information and increasingly are using social media to educate themselves about their health care needs. Conconsumers also are using social media to share experiences—good and bad—about their health care encounters. “If someone is unhappy, they will turn to social media,” says Nancy Jern, senior media relations officer, social media, for Lifepath, Providence, R.I. “If you are not there, you don’t know what people are saying about you.”

About 1,300 hospitals have Facebook pages, according to the Social Media Health Network, a project of the Mayo Clinic Center for Social Media, Rochester, Minn. The network provides guidance to health care organizations that want to apply social media in health and health care. The primary reason for hospitals branching into social media include the ability to connect with their patients and communities and to build brand awareness.

Social media use among hospitals (number of hospital users)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Number of Hospitals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>1,292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>1,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4Square</td>
<td>1,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Teddy Fishbein, director of interactive marketing, NorthShore University HealthSystem, Evanston, Ill., agrees. “We want the expectation that people conduct themselves on social media in the same manner as they would over the phone or in person.”

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Social media is no longer a platform that your hospital can ignore.
Four key steps to launching a social media program

Develop a social media policy that ensures compliance with legal and regulatory requirements. This will help protect your organization from liability and ensure that your social media activity is in line with state and federal regulations. It’s also important to communicate expected policies and procedures and relevant regulations to all staff members.

Implement a training program. Make sure all staff members understand the policy, compliance requirements, and any relevant regulations. This will help mitigate risk. At a minimum, policy should stress that employees of your organization should not post defamatory or misleading information, which could damage the reputation of your organization.

Create a content development plan. Develop a schedule to ensure timely release of high-quality content. This will help keep your audience engaged and interested. However, if the content is too high-quality, the audience might become bored or disinterested.

Use a social media monitoring tool. This will help you track the online conversation and engage with your audience. This tool will also help you determine if someone ‘likes’ your content or not. It’s important to establish a content calendar to keep your audience interested and engaged.

My biggest surprise was how much detail there is out there. And the most eye-opening to see how many supportive organizations are scared of risk. But actually talk about the news of the day, but also talk about what people are saying, that’s a big part of our organization.

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