



# VIEWpoint

## A Look Into the Not-Too-Distant Future

**H**ealthcare leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to connect with today's Internet-savvy "prosumers" through new social media tools. But, to capitalize, they'll need to accept one fact that many have so far been reluctant to embrace: The most powerful voice in healthcare now belongs to the patient. Not the physician. Not the healthcare administrator. The patient is now in the driver's seat.

### The Changing Internet and the Rise of the Prosumer

How did this happen? In a word—the Internet. But not the old one-dimensional Internet; the new Internet, a rich, multimedia experience through which consumers not only read content, but also react to and interact with it. They modify, augment, comment on, rank, and share it. And they don't stop there. They add their own original content in the form of blogs, videos, podcasts, and more—and they share it with others through numerous social media sites.

As it turns out, this new Internet was just what increasingly proactive and information-hungry consumers, or more appropriately, "prosumers," were looking for. Frustrated with a managed care system in which gatekeepers exercised complete control over access to healthcare, and finding themselves paying for more care out-of-pocket as employers reduced benefits, prosumers increasingly began to insist on the "4 A's": access, availability, accommodation, and accountability.

Blind belief in the advice of a doctor who was not easily accessible was replaced by research-driven advice that was quickly and effortlessly enabled by the Internet. No matter how unusual the symptoms or how obscure the condition, alternative diagnosis and treatment options were readily available. More importantly, so was the advice of those who suffered the same ailment. Digital relationships formed and the "peer-patient voice" quickly rose above all others. The result: Prosumers are changing the healthcare paradigm.

### The Emerging Model

Today most healthcare organizations still admit, treat, and release. It's a one-dimensional, "you need us when you're sick" model that no longer works in this era of the prosumer. The new healthcare model is a "you need us for life" model.

How successfully organizations transition into this new model will not only determine profit margins, but ultimately, survival. The time to leverage the changes in the Internet and the healthcare consumer is now. The best way to do that is to create an online lifestyle and wellness social networking community.

### Your Online Community

In the new healthcare model, patients will no longer simply be treated and released. They'll automatically become members of an online social networking community made available on your Website. Transplant patients will become members of a transplant group. Breast

cancer patients will go into a breast cancer group. The community will also include lifestyle groups like nutrition and weight management, smoking cessation, yoga, and others.

Each group will offer a complete set of social media tools—a forum, blogs, videos, podcasts, and more. Members will be able to comment on content, add to it, e-mail it, and bookmark it. Videos will have embed codes that allow anyone to add the video to his or her blog, Website, or newsletter. RSS feeds will ensure that members are automatically notified whenever new content is posted. The result will be a rapidly growing network of inbound links to your community and to your Website.

Content created for and by your community will become the magnet that attracts and keeps prosumers in your sphere of influence. The community will ultimately include hundreds or even thousands of members who have never been in your facility and may never be. Yet they are contributing content, adding value, and spreading the word. If and when they do need treatment, they'll be your patients.

This online community will make potential customers out of everyone in your service area—not just those who currently need treatment. It will serve as a significant market differentiator, lower the cost of new customer acquisition, and improve patient compliance. And, in an era of

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accountability, there will be countless ways to monetize this community, including well-timed and targeted advertising, sponsorships, e-commerce, fundraising, new retail opportunities, and more.

What will it take to create this successful online community? Following are some tips for getting started.

### Content, Content, and Content

Strong content is a necessity, and the more it amplifies the patient voice, the more powerful it will be. The key is compelling storytelling. Stories of inspiration, hope, success, and determination—all told from patients' perspectives—are the most important and powerful content you can have.

That said, high-quality consumer-generated content is the holy grail of content because it's free, powerful, frequently serves as a third-party endorsement and, most importantly, spawns more consumer-generated content. That's Health 2.0.

### What If They Say Something Bad About Us?

Occasionally they will. But the good will far outweigh the bad. Communities are also very good about policing themselves. Inappropriate behavior is usually immediately flagged and reported by members. Highly customizable filters identify and automatically remove undesirable words, phrases, and competitors' names.

Certainly fear of negative content discourages some organizations from participating in social media. But the Internet has already demonstrated that you can no longer hide an inferior

product or poor customer service. And innovative healthcare organizations have found that prudent use of social media, with appropriate controls, can help address trouble spots and manage negative remarks before they go too far (see sidebar).

### What About Inaccurate Information?

When prosumers generate content, there is a risk that some information will be inaccurate. To help protect your organization, write a disclaimer:

*"Memorial Hospital provides this online community and Website as a public service. This site includes facts, viewpoints, opinions, and recommendations of individuals and organizations not associated with*

*Memorial Hospital. Memorial Hospital does not offer any warranties or guarantees or otherwise endorse these views, opinions, or recommendations."*

### Start Small, But Move Boldly

In the past, hospitals and healthcare organizations have embraced "slow" change. But that was yesterday's world. The only certainty in today's world is that change will come at a rate of speed heretofore unknown. The true healthcare leaders will move boldly into social media, knowing that if they don't someone else will. It may be necessary to start small, say, with just one social network for one particular group of patients, but by all means, get started. Otherwise, you risk being late to the game and missing out on connecting with today's prosumers. ○

## Six Rules for Managing Social Media

- 1 Don't allow anyone to post anything anonymously. Comments can't be taken seriously unless you know they are legitimate. Make everyone register to participate.
- 2 Moderate all consumer-generated content. It isn't posted until it's approved by a human being. Once it is posted, participate in the discussion. Answer concerns openly.
- 3 Address criticism directly and promptly. If it's legitimate, acknowledge it and then fix it. And when you do, make sure everyone knows you fixed it. In many cases the critic is actually doing you a favor by offering feedback before real damage is done—or before it winds up in the local paper.
- 4 Make sure all members know the rules and then enforce them. If someone violates the rules, ban them from the community and make sure other members know why. Transparency is critical to a successful social media presence.
- 5 It is entirely appropriate to prohibit and censor certain topics, such as personal client data or other confidential information, as well as foul language.
- 6 Don't be afraid to ask customers to recommend your services or to submit testimonials and positive comments.