

Developing a Social Media Marketing Plan

by Mark Shelley and Dan Dunlop

It's time to take your hospital into the world of social media marketing, but first there are a few items to consider. Too many organizations are pursuing social media without first developing the strategic rationale that supports and guides the program. The appropriate first step is the development of a social media marketing plan.

When developing such a marketing plan, there are many tools for you to consider employing, and the options grow more varied every day. For example:

- » Blogs (e.g., Wordpress, Blogger, and Typepad)
- » Social networks (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Ning)
- » Microblogging (e.g., Twitter, Pownce, Tumblr, and Jaiku)
- » Social bookmarking/content sharing (e.g., Delicious, Digg, Diigo, Fark, and Squidoo)
- » Discussion boards and forums
- » Online video (e.g., YouTube and IYou video)
- » Patient communities (e.g., Patients Like Me, MedHelp, Daily Strength, and Revolution Health)
- » Podcasting
- » Photosharing (e.g., Flickr)
- » Presentation Sharing (e.g., SlideShare, mypllick, and SlideBoom)
- » Virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life)
- » Wikis
- » Widgets

But looking at social media tools is really putting the cart before the horse.

You should get familiar with these tools, but before taking action, you need a strategy for how you'll engage your stakeholders and target audiences using social media.

How do you get started? Generally, your social media marketing plan should emulate the following typical marketing communication plan:

1. Identify goals and objectives
2. Conduct market analysis (e.g., look at trends, needs, competition, and best practices)
3. Implement social media program components, including integration with a traditional campaign
4. Assess and allocate resources
5. Monitor and measure

That's the big picture. The following steps specify what you should consider when creating a social media marketing plan for your hospital. Although there are several steps to the process, this need not be an overwhelming endeavor.

Given what you already know about your market and your target audiences, you should be able to draft a preliminary social media marketing plan in just a few days. Don't try to write a book. Keep it simple and direct. For example, focus on:

» **Participation.** If you're not involved in social media, get involved. Consider this remedial training. At a minimum, join Facebook, LinkedIn, and start following some industry blogs. You will find it difficult to sell or even construct a social media marketing plan

if you aren't familiar with the functionality, strengths, and weaknesses of the various platforms.

» **Culture and preparedness.** Start by assessing your organization's appetite for social media. How risk averse is it? Fear in the C-suite is one of the major obstacles you'll face when implementing a social media marketing program.

Determine the steps you need to take to bring members of your leadership along and prepare them for this venture into the world of social media. Start feeding them a steady diet of articles, white papers, and books on the subject.

Ideally, presenting them with a well-reasoned, strategic social media marketing plan will help make your leadership more comfortable with the idea.

» **Target audience.** Define your target audience and key stakeholders and research how they use social media. This will provide insights that you can apply to your plan.

» **Objectives and goals.** Take each group (e.g., grateful patients, referring physicians, employees, reporters, influentials in the community, and your board) and outline its associated marketing objectives.

Compare these objectives to what you've learned about how each group currently uses social media. Also look at industry best practices and review the activities of your top competitors. As you move forward, you should be prepared to adjust your goals based on new learning about the potential

that social media represents. You may well learn that possibilities exist that you had not anticipated, and this may affect the goals you set.

» **Desired outcomes.** Clearly define your organization's goals. They may include increases in brand awareness/stature, enhanced search rankings and Web traffic, improved preference, engaged brand ambassadors, and growing patient volumes.

Be as specific as possible. The desired outcomes should affect the ways in which you measure results.

» **Toolbox and channels.** Identify social media channels that will help you accomplish your marketing objectives for each audience. This will become your toolbox.

The vehicles you select must consider several factors, including resources, desired outcomes, and their ability to effectively deliver your message and content. This assumes that you know the strengths of various social media platforms. (Hopefully, you've done the earlier analysis of each group's use of social media.)

Identifying the appropriate social media tools may require the most research. For example, you may not know which LinkedIn groups reach a specific target audience, so you'll need to get online and start digging around. Join those groups and start following the conversation. Find out what these people care about. Identify the top bloggers and thought leaders that you want to influence. Start following those blogs and monitoring those conversations.

» **Integration.** Define the process you'll use to integrate the program with



Lexington Medical Center uses its blog to update patients on any news regarding the organization and its leadership.

the traditional marketing and branding efforts of your organization. And don't forget about PR and media relations. There are many great social media tools that can make your PR program more effective, such as pitch engine, LinkedIn, filtrbox, and Meltwater News. Be sure to incorporate those into the plan. Consider, too, the role of social media in internal communication.

» **Resource allocation.** If you allow it to happen, your social media program may end up dominating your life. That fear keeps many people from taking the plunge. It is vital that you make your program sustainable, avoid overtaxing your internal resources, and fend off social media fatigue. You'll

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need to get tactical by identifying how you'll use each platform in your plan given the internal or external resources you have available. Much information can be repurposed and shared within various social media platforms.

A simple press release can be distributed through LinkedIn groups, become a blog post, a tweet on Twitter, and fodder for the wall of your Facebook group. You must also define work flow and who will do the work. Who will develop content for these various outreach mechanisms? How will information travel within your organization to

the content generators? It's important to recognize that you don't have to do everything at once. You will be more likely to experience success if you avoid biting off more than you can chew. Start small and you can always grow the program over time.

» **Measurement.** Determine how you will measure results, knowing that not everything can be measured. Build these measurement tools into your plan. Whether it's Google Analytics for your blogger site, Wordpress' built-in analytics (e.g., page views, referrers, and comments), Technorati's blog rankings, friend counts, or member volume on your Facebook group, it is not difficult to find meaningful ways to measure

the appeal and relevance of your social media efforts.

It is also important to measure productivity on your part, not just the activity of your target audience. This means you should measure your posting frequency and your level of engagement.

» **Conversation tracker.** Develop a plan for actively monitoring social media conversations. It is essential that you know what's being said about your brand online. The most obvious tools are Google Alerts and Yahoo! Alerts. If you don't have these set up for your hospital, you should do so immediately. Each service will send you e-mail alerts when your keywords come up in blogs or traditional news reports.

The screenshot shows the Facebook interface for the 'Friends of Lexington Medical Center' group. At the top, there's a blue header with the Facebook logo and a search bar. Below that, a yellow banner says 'Sign up for Facebook to join Friends of Lexington Medical Center.' The group name 'Friends of Lexington Medical Center' is displayed with a 'Global' tag. The 'Basic Info' section includes a description: 'This is a group for friends, patients, family members, and employees of Lexington Medical Center - who want to share their good feelings and celebrate quality health care. Lexington Medical Center, located in West Columbia, S.C., anchors a county-wide health care network that includes six community medical centers throughout Lexington County. At its heart is the 384-bed state-of-the-art Lexington Medical Center, with a reputation for the highest quality care.' The 'Contact Info' section lists the website as 'http://www.lexmed.com' and other links. The 'Recent News' section contains two posts: one from May 13, 2009, about golfer Lee Trevino, and another from May 5, 2009, about the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) approving a Certificate of Need (CON) application for emergency angioplasty. The 'Group Type' section states 'This is an open group. Anyone can join and invite others to join.' The 'Admins' section lists Nicholas, Jennifer, Barbara, Lauren, and Dan (creator).

Lexington Medical Center also connects with supporters on social networking site Facebook.

You can also use Technorati's daily custom RSS feeds to get quick updates on blogs that mention your hospital's name.

BackType notifies you when people comment about your hospital on blogs. Receive updates as they happen or at a the frequency of your choice.

BlogPulse is a blog search engine that reports on daily activity relative to your brand.

To monitor conversations on Twitter, try TweetBeep. It keeps track of conversations that mention your hospital, with hourly updates. Another option is to use Twitter Search (<http://search.twitter.com>) and establish an RSS feed on your query.

For monitoring conversations on message boards, try BoardTracker. It lets you monitor forum posts and topics.

SocialMention.com provides quick snapshots of conversations surrounding your hospital's brand. You can set up daily e-mail alerts.

Facebook Lexicon lets you search your hospital's name and immediately see how often it is discussed on Facebook users' walls.

MonitorThis allows you to subscribe to more than 20 search engine feeds at the same time.

Take some time and get to know these various tools. Choose the ones that are the least labor intensive and that can most easily be integrated into your team's daily routine. You can also use these monitoring tools to track conversations about your cross-town rivals.

» **Policy.** Develop an employee social media policy. With an increase in social media engagement by your

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Lexington Medical Center uses its Facebook photo page to share images from press events, outdoor ads, and other photos that supporters may find interesting.

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organization, an employee social media policy becomes more important. Start by reviewing social media policies of other organizations. For example, Mayo Clinic has its employee social media policy published online.

The best reason for actively engaging your stakeholders via social media is that it will help your organization achieve its marketing objectives.

Just like any other marketing initiative, your entry into the world of social media should be strategically driven and defined by a well-crafted marketing plan. It is essential that you understand the various social media platforms, allocate the necessary resources, and secure buy-in within your organization before getting started. **+**

Editor's note: Shelley is director of marketing and advertising at Lexington Medical Center in West Columbia, SC, and Dunlop is president and CEO of Jennings Co. in Chapel Hill, NC.

Even internal ads are included on the Lexington Medical Center Facebook page.

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