

Social Media and the Patient Experience

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Abstract

As patients continue to turn to online resources for health care information to guide their care decisions, it is becoming increasingly important for radiologists to engage with patients online via social media platforms. There are many ways physicians can use social media to provide patients with valuable information and improve the overall patient experience. By optimizing online discoverability, curating radiology content, engaging with patient communities, and producing mineable social media content, radiologists can emerge as thought leaders in this new form of patient-centered communication and information exchange.

Key Words: Social media, patient experience, hashtag ontology, online content curation

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INTRODUCTION

Social media in medicine is here to stay. The banter centered on social media's "emergence" and "potential" has been largely replaced by discussions dissecting best practices and real-use case scenarios from practices that have successfully implemented social media strategies [1,2].

The uses for social media are boundless. Some practices have used social media to build their practices, whereas others have used various online platforms for education [3]. However, relative to other industries, adoption of social media has been slow in radiology. There are a number of myths that have delayed acceptance of social media in radiology, including (1) the perception that one must be technologically savvy to use a social media strategy, (2) that patients do not want to discuss their health online, and (3) the belief that there is a general lack of trust regarding information discussed within social media communities. Although physicians' use of social media has been delayed in part by these misconceptions, there is one population that has enthusiastically integrated social

media use into their lives and continues to call for its increased use among physicians. That population is our patients.

There has been a substantial amount of attention paid to the patient experience. Often, efforts targeting improved patient experience have focused on scheduling, ease of payment, improved communication of test results, price transparency, and the language used in radiology reports. Where in all of this does social media fit?

Importantly, despite increasing use of social media by patients, navigating online engagement with this population can be challenging for physicians. Jain et al [4] recently demonstrated that different populations have varying opinions about what content is appropriate to share on publically available social media sites. Additionally, most health care organizations and institutions have their own social media use policies that impose varying regulations for physicians to abide by [5]. These facts provide context for the ensuing discussion and also demonstrate why further scholarly work in this field is warranted.

The purpose of this report is to describe the role social media plays in improving the patient experience. Specifically, its role in improving physicians' online presence, curating content, developing patient communities, and disseminating peer-reviewed literature are discussed. Finally, techniques for engaging diverse populations, including patients, to discuss radiology-specific topics are described.

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PATIENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ONLINE PRESENCE OF PHYSICIANS

When does a patient form a first impression about a physician or practice? The answer to this question can be largely informed by the concept of “pre-commerce.” From Bob Pearson’s [6] book *Pre-Commerce*, this entity is best described as the way in which consumers develop opinions about various products and brands before tangibly engaging with them. A beneficial exercise that best illustrates “pre-commerce” is thinking about the process by which people now buy cars, and comparing that with how car purchases occurred 30 years ago.

Thirty years ago, people went to their local car dealerships and looked at the various cars on the lot. Perhaps their opinions regarding the various brands of cars were influenced by prior car purchases, by where they were raised, or by whom their parents worked for. However, consumers were otherwise largely unknowledgeable about the durability, safety, and features of the newest releases. Opinions about these cars were substantially affected by interactions with them during test drives or by the sales job of the car lot attendants. Often, the choice regarding which car to purchase was not made until after seeing it, driving it, and discussing it. Compare that with how car purchasing takes place now. Before driving to a car dealership, most car purchasers perform a number of tasks. These usually include reviewing the vehicle’s safety and durability via one of many consumer testing sites, obtaining peer reviews about the vehicle, and, if buying a used car, retrieving a complete history of the vehicle. Finally, the average price of the car, including access to geographic variability of the price, is reviewed. Ultimately, contemporary car buyers have already decided which car to buy (and how much they are willing to pay for it) before engaging with the car or car salesperson on the day of purchase. This is the concept of pre-commerce.

Patients want similar access to this type of information for their physicians and hospitals as well. The days of making a first impression when you meet your patients in person are numbered. Rather, in the modern era, our patients have likely already formed opinions about us and our practices before we meet them. And those opinions are largely influenced by the information they discover online.

In that respect, when was the last time you Googled your name and/or your practice? What did you find? Vijayasathri et al [7] recently demonstrated that the first page of Google search results for radiologists in the United States is largely dominated by third-party physician rating sites that limit the amount of control

physicians have on the content hosted on those sites. Physicians and their practices can “displace” these third-party sites from Google search results (such as vitals.com and healthgrades.com) by starting and maintaining active social media profiles. These social media sites are preferentially prioritized compared with third-party sites and, if active, will likely be listed ahead of them accordingly. Recently, Google has further stated that social media activity will continue to be prioritized by the search algorithms it uses [8,9]. However, because the third-party physician ratings sites will still exist, and likely shift their strategies to adapt to future search algorithms, attention should also be paid to creating and populating physician profiles on these sites. Gilbert et al [10] previously demonstrated that fewer than 10% of radiologists have existing profiles on the dominant third-party physician rating sites, which represents an additional way radiologists can favorably mold their online presence if social media profiles are less preferred.

The implications of increasing use of physician rating sites by patients remain largely unknown. Ranard et al [11] recently demonstrated that Yelp reviews of hospital care were bimodal in distribution, correlated with overall Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems survey ratings, yet also provided additional information that correlated most strongly with positive and negative experiences for patients that is not captured by these existing survey tools. These findings suggest that physician rating website reviews will be used with increasing frequency to determine patient satisfaction scores of physicians and hospitals.

Despite these findings, questions still remain regarding whether this type of online content can be used to accurately judge the performance of physicians and health care organizations [12]. Prior studies have demonstrated that physicians maintain a largely unfavorable view of physician ratings sites [13] and that physician rating sites have a largely negative impact on physician welfare because of the emotional stress induced by public evaluation of professional skills and personal traits [14,15]. However, a recent analysis of 4,999 online physician ratings by Kadry et al [16] demonstrated that patients largely give favorable reviews of their physicians.

Ultimately, the content patients are able to find about physicians before tangibly engaging with them will continue to have greater influence on their perceptions and opinions about individual physicians and physician practices. Social media is a key tool in optimizing an

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