



Social Media For Health Organizations

May 2010

The Value of Social Media in Healthcare Communication

Social media represents a broad change in how people communicate with one another – using online technology to share opinion, insights, experiences and information.

The term “social media” refers to Internet-based applications that people can easily participate in and contribute to – these applications enable online social interaction.

They include blogging (WordPress and Twitter), social networking (Facebook and LinkedIn), video and photo sharing (YouTube and Flickr), and collaboration (Wikis).

The main difference between social media and traditional media is that the conversation is shaped by the users, rather than being controlled by an organization or department. Social media is most powerful when used to engage the audience and encourage dialogue (many to many) as opposed to the monologues (one to many) which are used by traditional media.

Health organizations using social media can benefit by increasing exposure of their brands or messages. When used strategically, this can lead to exponential reach, virally, by people sharing “your” story with their network(s). If content is relevant and engaging, the audience can interact with and republish messages. The content lends itself to being archived, indexed by search engines, and shared by users in many ways.

When we consider the goals of most health promotion communication – increasing awareness and promoting behaviour change – social media’s potential of expanded reach and engagement is a good fit. Healthcare organizations are using social media now more than ever before to:

- Communicate with large audiences which may have been hard to access through other communication channels.
- Build relationships with their audience and engage in dialogue, something that is difficult to do through traditional media.
- Clarify health messages, build trust and convey transparency.

The following examples help make the case for using social media within health communication.

Rationale #1 - The audience is online, and social

In general, people are spending less time watching television, reading newspapers or listening to the radio and spending more time on the Internet. According to [Wikipedia](#), 83.4% of the Canadian population uses the Internet.

How they are spending their time online is equally important. Canadian research shows Internet users are turning towards social media at a rapid pace.

*Two-thirds of
the world’s
Internet
population
visit blogs
and/or social
networking
websites.*

*- The Nielsen
Company*

As of March 2010, over 14 million Canadians had Facebook accounts (out of more than 50 million users worldwide).

The June 2009 Ipsos Reid study entitled [Social Networking 2009](#) found a “dramatic increase in the number of online Canadians who have a profile on an online social network. In 18 months the percentage increased from 39% to 56%.”

A recent Nielsen report [Social Networking's New Global Footprint](#) estimates 2/3 of the world's Internet population visit blogs and/or social networking websites and that social networking is now more popular than personal email. According to the [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#), 75% of American adults aged 18- 24 have used a social networking site, and 77% of active Internet users read blogs.

Meanwhile, watching online videos has become one of the most popular social media activities. According to the [Nielsen Company](#), “the number of unique viewers of online video increased 10.5% year-over-year from 17.6 million unique viewers in February 2009 to 141 million in February 2010.”

Rationale #2 - Popularity of searching Internet for health information

In the past people may have relied on only a few sources when looking for health information – including their physician, a friend or family member.

Today, they are also searching Google, reading blogs, listening to podcasts, posting comments or updating their social network status or profiles. People are participating more actively in matters of their health, especially prevention, and are turning to online networks for answers to health related information.

The [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#) estimates that 61% of American adults go online for health information and 7% access social media related to health. Their 2009 report on *The Social Life of Health Information* found that Internet “technology is not an end, but a means to accelerate the pace of discovery, widen social networks, and sharpen the questions someone might ask when they do get to talk to a health professional.”

An example of this is found within the web project, [Patients Like Me](#). Started in 2004 by three MIT engineers, this online community allows people to connect and share information about their personal experiences with a goal to improve the lives of patients diagnosed with diseases. Recognizing their audience was online, this organization created a web-based platform for collecting and sharing real world, outcome-based patient data.

If applied strategically, social media can enhance exposure of an issue and improve engagement around specific health-related topics.

Rationale #3 - Many health organizations are participating

Healthcare may not be as quick to adopt social media as some other industries, but over the past few years there have been many innovators in this sector using social media to increase awareness. For example, the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) offers a wide range of resources to share content through media tools including RSS, Twitter, Facebook, widgets and online videos.

The [Centre for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has also experimented with various social media noting that by expanding their communication channels to include social media they are better able to “communicate relevant, timely, and action-based health information.”

The CDC uses blogs, eNetworks, eGames, podcasts and other channels to raise awareness of health issues and motivate behaviour change. Recently, they have experimented with highly integrated campaigns to reach large audiences related to H1N1 and annual seasonal influenza vaccination campaigns. They recommend integrating “social media products with research-driven strategies” to ensure a broad reach and comprehensive message aimed at health promotion and protection.

The [Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation](#) rolled out a social media campaign in February 2010 to promote Heart Month. Easy calls-to-action placed directly on their homepage allowed visitors to spread the word. Under the message “Help share the Heart Month message through your online community,” they included a simple button which automatically generated a Twitter message to a person’s entire online network.

Rationale #4 – Social media enhances exposure to audiences

Many organizations are using social media to strengthen their brand by adding it to their marketing and communication activities. If applied strategically, this medium can enhance exposure of an issue and improve engagement around specific health-related topics.

Social media has a unique power to introduce a subject to a vast number of people in a short amount of time. When the content is engaging, users will converse about it on their own by republishing it (retweet, share, comment, blog or send to a friend).

The Quit Now campaign through the BC Lung Association uses a sound engagement strategy which expands the reach of the message and uses the audience's own voice for authenticity.

Aside from providing greater exposure of, and trust in, the message through peer-to-peer sharing, it also results in higher rankings on search engines, which lead to better website positioning.

An example of how some health organizations are using social media for this advantage is the [“Quit Now”](#) campaign developed for the BC Lung Association. Quit Now is an Internet-based smoking cessation service available free-of-charge for all British Columbians. Users can access expert advice, online peer support, quitting strategies, email reminders and more. In addition to hosting a website rich with interaction, Quit Now uses other social media channels to gain attention – such as Twitter posts, Facebook calls to action and opportunities to “tell your quitting story.”

This is a sound engagement strategy as it not only expands the reach of the Quit Now message, it also uses the audience's own voice for authenticity.

Other Media are Listening

Social media stories are not simply confined to social media audiences. Traditional media (newspapers, magazines, television) are paying attention and covering issues they are introduced to through social media channels.

Conventional media coverage tactics including press releases and photo opportunities are being complemented by social media participation because blog posts, “tweets” and other social media messages have the potential to reach journalists and catch their interest in a different way.

Partnering to Increase Reach

When partners coordinate campaign tactics, it is possible for multiple parties to collaborate and coordinate health messaging to reach and engage as many people as possible.

In 2009, during the [Salmonella Typhimurium event](#), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) worked together to develop an integrated social media campaign. The goal of the campaign was to provide timely, easily accessible up-to-date information about peanut-product recalls. By tapping into the viral nature of social media (where each audience member tells their friends, who tell their friends, and so on), they were able to work together to coordinate messaging and expand their reach exponentially.

There is minimal cost to accessing social media channels, however, adding social media to the marketing mix requires the dedication of human resource time on a regular basis.

Rationale #5 – Low cost, high return

With rare exception there is minimal cost to accessing social media channels to communicate existing messages, products and tools. In addition, channels are highly accessible, rarely necessitating software downloads or special system requirements. Many applications including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube even provide free user-accounts and some software is available at no charge.

However, adding social media to the marketing mix does require the dedication of human resource time on a regular basis.

The School of Public Health Services at George Washington University recently conducted a study called [*New Media Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing: The Promise and Potential*](#). In this study the researchers reviewed several campaigns with behavioural goals. The most encouraging finding was that despite the campaign budget, every example they reviewed was found to be successful to expand the campaign message.

“Whether measured with page views to websites, downloads of campaign videos, or numbers of text messages sent, all campaigns were able to generate significant exposure to their campaign materials with new media.”

The study goes on to explain some of the cost advantages of using social media to complement an organization’s other communication tools. “In general, once traditional campaign materials are developed, the additional resources required for new media appear to be comparatively minimal, and those efforts may have long lasting effects.”

If you would like to learn more about adding a social media strategy to your marketing mix, please contact us at 250-372-5900 or email sharon@solutiongroup.ca