SOCIAL MEDIA

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The internet has changed how we interact and communicate with one another, and this is especially true in health care, where your physician peers are benefitting from their ability to communicate with patients through various social media platforms. The Oxford Dictionary defines social media as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking." [1] Social media allows the health care community—and specifically physicians—to disseminate health information in (most often) a one-way form. One-way communication seems to be the safest approach, considering HIPAA, for communicating with patients and the community in general.

NUMBERS

Let's look at the numbers to see the enormous opportunity that presents itself to physicians. So far in 2017, there are 2.46 billion global social network users! [2] The active monthly users, as of August 2017, for the following social networking sites are: Facebook (2.047 billion), YouTube (1.5 billion), WhatsApp (1.2 billion), Instagram (700 million) and Twitter (328 million). [3] (See chart) These numbers are astounding, and considering that in 2016, internet users worldwide spent 118 minutes a day on social networking sites, they show engagement and why you should use these sites to your advantage. [4]

Social media can go beyond regurgitating your CV digitally; the ability to use these social networking sites to communicate with your patients in a compassionate way can not only positively influence patient retention, but, depending on your audience size, it can also provide you with an increase in patient trust, medical practice growth and the ability to be a thought provoking leader in your chosen specialty.

PRACTICE TACTICS

Here are some practice tactics to help you become an efficient social media user through patient education in no time.

(1) Choose a time. With the challenge that physicians face of balancing work and life, the commitment to update social media can seem daunting. The easiest fix is to set a time one day a week to write posts and then schedule them in advance. There are various applications (for example, Hootsuite, Percolate, Falcon.io, etc.) that allow you to schedule multiple posts across multiple social media platforms. You can even schedule an entire month of posts in advance!

(2) Pick a Topic. When choosing a topic to post about, think about this one question: Will my patients care? If so, proceed. If you are seeing an increase in infections, write about it. If you notice that many of your diabetic patients are struggling with their diets, write an article with links to recipes on the American Diabetes Association website. Another option is to keep your patients up to date on National Health Observance dates. Go to https://healthfinder.gov/NHO/, pick what diseases you see in your patient population and write a post. Lastly, you can always ask your patients in person or in your patient satisfaction surveys what conditions or topics they would like to learn more about.

(3) Bridge the Gap. Many of the posts you see on social networking sites are inundated with medical jargon and technical words that many patients do not understand. You can bridge the gap by using common words and writing at a level that will be understandable for your patients. In my experience speaking to patients, the No. 1 complaint when searching for medical information online is the inability to understand medical and science speak. This is your opportunity as a provider to show your empathy and compassion by recognizing what matters to patients and providing resources outside of your practice to help them at home.

The time is now to start using social media as another communication tool for you and your medical practice. These three simple tactics will have you organized, on-topic, and communicating on a level that your patients will understand while inspiring trust.
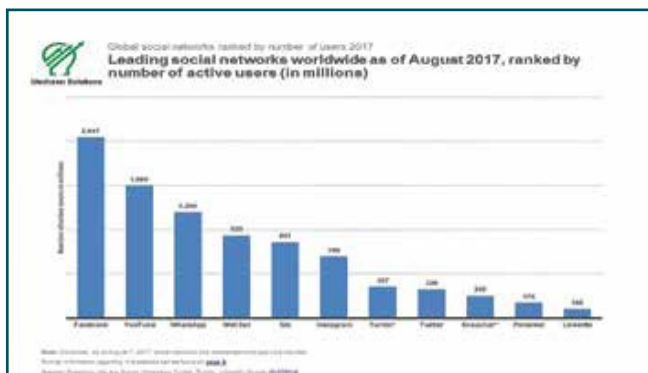
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