



Online Engagement of Healthcare Professionals

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1: Health and the Web

Let's face it, we're never going to look at all 250+ million websites on the World Wide Web. Why would we? That's what Google is for.

But what if we have just a simple health enquiry? That should be straightforward enough, right? Well, for us patients, the volume of health information on the Web is enormous, and searching for an answer to a health-related question can return, well, mixed results.

Those of us who are not Healthcare Professionals (HCPs) may find it hard to judge the quality of the information we find. For a lot of worried patients, any mention online of a condition linked to their symptoms can be enough to give them cause for concern and generate a potentially unnecessary visit to a GP.

HCPs face similar challenges as they increasingly rely on the Internet to support their professional life. It is now normal for HCPs to turn to websites to find information for their patients. They will also use websites in their own professional capacity, to look up information, support their own decision making, network with their colleagues, or to aid their professional development.

However, even HCPs suffer from too much choice and may not always know where to go to get the best answer. Doctors are a good example: competition for their attention is high and they will be courted, targeted, and tempted to use any number of online services. Often they may be incentivised or paid to take part in online activities, as a lot of organisations want to influence a change in their behaviour or to know what they think.

Most HCPs will look for a trusted brand when deciding which sources of information to use, just as the average Internet shopper would sooner buy from Amazon than from someone they've never heard of.

In healthcare, the answer is almost certainly not to jump onto a Facebook or Twitter bandwagon. These are not the trusted sources of health information that people look for. But health isn't always rational. Patients sometimes want to believe what they read. This means that if even one person on a forum somewhere says something about your brand,



chances are someone is going to believe them, whether it's true or not. This is the nature of the Web – it's social, and it's only going to get more so.

2: The Social Web

It used to be the case that if you didn't have a website, your organisation would be considered at best outdated, at worst, in danger of losing out to competitors who were online. Now, it's not a question of simply being online, it's also a question of what you *do* online.

Marketing agencies will tell you that you need social media, you need an iPhone app, an Android app, you need to be on YouTube, Facebook & Twitter - and maybe you do. But do you know *why* you do? Do you know what the implications for your organisation are?

What is the social web? Well, what it *isn't* is 'that thing that teenagers do on Facebook'. It's now that thing that everyone who is online does to a greater or lesser extent, whether they realise it or not. It's about networking, it's about sharing, it's about you and your identity.

Social has changed the landscape forever, and it can't be ignored.

This is where the real challenges in digital marketing lie. When people say, "we need to be online", my first response is "why?" They are right, of course, they do need to be online, but if they find it hard to answer why, it isn't going to end well and they are going to spend a lot of money to find that out.

Maybe you offer something no one else can. Maybe you do what someone else does, but you do it better. Maybe you see an opportunity to make money. Maybe you just want to share information. Whatever the reason, your decision to be online must be motivated by something.

In the field of healthcare, that something isn't always going to be helped directly by social media, but you'll almost certainly find that 'social' comes into it somewhere.

If you've ever rated a movie or reviewed a product you purchased online, you've been an early pioneer of the collaborative nature of online behaviour. In healthcare, you can now rate your doctor, your hospital experience, your quality of care. What you say will influence the decisions of others and ultimately improve the standard of healthcare.

If you are building a website, building a community, or offering a service in health, remember that like the Web in general, the landscape has changed and you need to be at the forefront of the changes to remain relevant.

3: Engagement

In previous posts, I've mentioned some of the challenges facing doctors due to widespread access to health information on the Web. But what do we mean when we talk



about ‘doctors’? Do we really mean all doctors? Is there a typical doctor? Obviously they all wear stethoscopes around their necks 24/7, but apart from that?!

We must be careful not to define our target audience solely by their profession.

Firstly, a GP is quite a different type of doctor to a hospital surgeon who is quite different to a psychiatrist. Yes, they are all medical doctors, but what they do is so different and their professional interests so far apart, they may as well be in different professions. So why would you communicate to them as if they are all the same?

Secondly, an individual’s profession may be the reason an organisation is trying to communicate with them, but their profession does not define them. Would you be happy to be defined purely by your job? HCPs care for, treat, and fix *other* people, but they themselves are also people.

Knowing how to communicate and connect with your target audience is where engagement starts. Like its marital equivalent, engagement means a relationship. Like most relationships, if only one party is putting the effort in, it’s not going to last long.

Simply putting something online for your users to see is not engagement. They might love it, they might hate it, they might want more, they might ask questions. If you’re not ready to deal with that, you’re not ready to engage.

Ask yourself how far you want to take your relationship. Is this going to lead to marriage and kids, or is it a brief affair?

Engagement, especially with social media, often means a developing a complex and in-depth relationship. It requires a lot of your input and energy.

However, this level of engagement is not always right, or feasible, for everyone.

Engagement can be more controlled and can work just as well, but you need to set expectations clearly from the start. It will involve some level of interaction with your users, but don’t go creating a discussion forum if you’re not prepared to take part in it yourself. What is your voice? What is your personality? Get these established first and communicate your identity to your audience. Then they will know what to expect from you

4: How not to do it

You may have heard the story about United Airlines, whose baggage handlers were responsible for breaking the guitar of Canadian singer/songwriter Dave Carroll in 2009.

When United Airlines refused to accept responsibility and offer compensation, Dave wrote a song about the event called ‘United Breaks Guitars’ (<http://bit.ly/9vZ3uD>), which he posted on YouTube and which immediately became an Internet phenomenon. It has



had nearly 10 million views, which is the kind of attention you obviously don't want if you're United Airlines.

This is one of a number of examples of how one disgruntled customer can have a major impact on a brand, but the reason this example is especially important is because Dave Carroll can't be dismissed as some Internet lunatic with a grudge.

Dave was a perfectly reasonable customer who tried all the official channels first. United Airlines professed to be open and keen to engage, but their actions did not match their words. Many believe this episode was responsible for a 10% drop in the share price of United Airlines and it could all have been easily avoided by simply engaging with the customer instead of hiding behind company policy.

Does this mean you should listen to every single one of your customers? If you're a national or multi-national company, that's not going to be easy and it may not always be the right thing to do. What will help you to decide, though, depends how engaged you already are with your customers.

If you have a relationship with your customers (or clients, patients, users...) you will be aware of what they are thinking. You won't get horrible surprises like United Airlines did. In fact, if relationships are done properly, your customers will be helping to guide the direction of your digital strategy and even your business decisions.

Welcome interaction, welcome discussion, welcome participation. It might just be that next time there is a problem, your customer tells you about it first, rather than the rest of the Internet.

Imagine what you could do with a panel of loyal, engaged customers who love your brand and want to help you out. The key is learning how to listen to them.

5: Measuring successful engagement

So how do you know whether you were successful and your audience was engaged with you?

One very obvious and effective way is to ask them. Of course, it helps to know who they are if you want to contact them directly. The holy grail is to have your customers register and tell you about themselves. You can then contact them at their preferred email address or send them a questionnaire, or invite them to be part of a panel. The world of online feedback is your oyster.

On one hand, registration can be considered a barrier to entry - having to register may put some users off visiting your site. On the other hand, registering for a service can bring the user a number of benefits they wouldn't get otherwise and they may actually prefer to register - it certainly hasn't done Facebook and Twitter any harm.



It does depend on the service you offer - on social networking sites for example, you expect to register, whereas for information-based sites you don't.

If you've got something so good, so unique, or so exclusive that users are going to want to pay for it, then a payment model might work for you. But paying for content is still relatively rare on the Web and is going through an interesting period of experimentation.

Unlike mobile, where you expect to pay for a decent app, the prevailing expectation of Web users is that content is free.

[Need to add a bit here with a couple of examples of health websites.]

6. Stats and analysis

So let's backtrack for a moment. The reality of the Web is that most of those 250 million websites are just there. No one really knows who's using them. No one really knows if anyone likes them. Someone had a good idea, published a website, and isn't really sure if it's doing what they hoped it would or not.

It is possible to gain a good understanding of your users, or perhaps more accurately, their usage, by looking at some simple statistics. You can use free services like Google Analytics or AW Stats, or commercial web statistics packages like Webtrends, or even develop something in-house.

This may sound really obvious, but believe me, the need to analyse the behaviour of your users is commonly overlooked and misunderstood. If you are a business or offering any kind of service, getting your metrics right is fundamental - before you build your website, not after.

Know what you want to measure and, just as importantly, *why* you want to measure it. It should influence how you build your site in the first place.

Almost anything can be measured, but there is absolutely no point in overwhelming yourself with data you will never use. Focus on what you need to know. This goes right back to why you are doing this at all. Examine your business strategy; it will tell you what is important to measure.

It's all about what you need to know. Stats packages will give you a lot of data, but they won't necessarily interpret it for you.

They will tell you you've had a 5% rise in Unique Users over the last 12 months but they won't tell you whether that's good or bad. They might tell you you have a bounce rate of 80% but not what to do to improve it.

For every question you ask, more questions will be raised. Decide what is important to know and make sure you focus on that. If you're not sure what questions to ask, get some help up front, it will save you a lot of pain in the long-term.