



Is Social Media Important
to Your Medical Practice?

Introduction



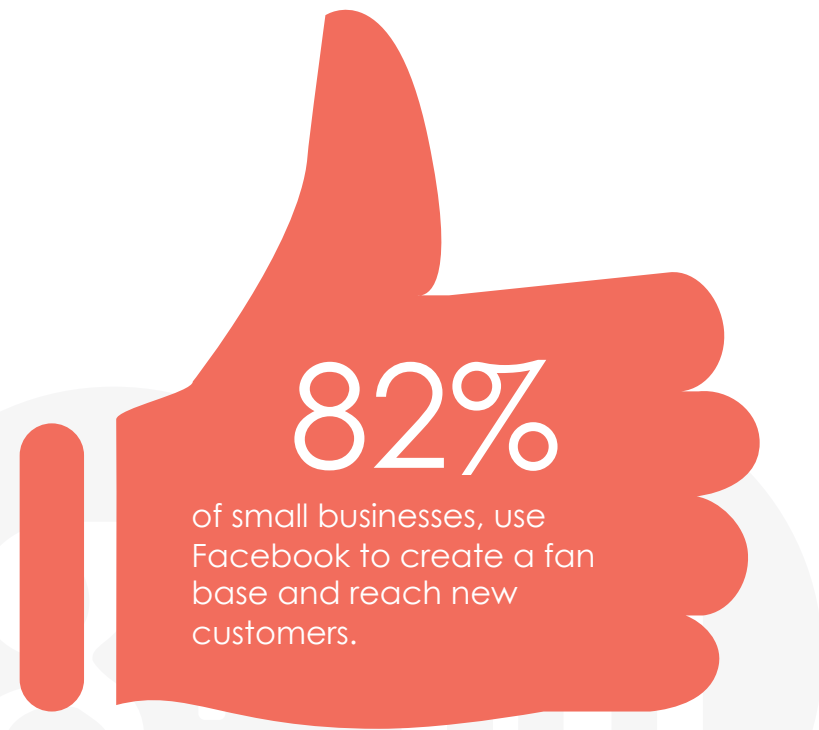
The phrases social media, digital and mobile marketing are thrown around quite often in corporate discussions as essential marketing tools to the growth of a business in today's fast-paced consumer-centric market place. You may be asking yourself as a physician whether you need to use social media or have an online presence in order to connect better to your patients, grow your practice or retain existing patients as do other organizations. As a manager of a small business, a physician needs to not only understand what social media is, but the factors that influence patient or customer behavior in choosing a physician or dentist in order to reach an educated conclusion about remaining outside the world of social media or engaging.



What Is Social Media?

The best way to define social media is perhaps to break it down. If media is a means of communication, like a newspaper or a radio, then social media would be a social instrument of communication. Think of regular media as a one-way street where you can read a newspaper or listen to a report on television, but you have very limited ability to give your thoughts on the matter. In today's Web 2.0 terms, this would be a website that doesn't just give you information, but interacts with you while giving you that information. Social media is a two-way street that gives you the ability to communicate too. Some of the popular social media sites are Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Digital media simply refers to audio, video, and photo content that have been encoded. There are also social photo and video sharing sites such as YouTube, Instagram and Flickr where users interact by sharing photos or videos and commenting on each other's submissions that would fall into the digital media category. So how many Americans actually participate in social networks? A whopping 69% of the US population uses social media networks regularly and of those 66% use Facebook daily. A remarkable 82% of small businesses, many of whom are probably your patients, use Facebook to create a fan base and reach new customers.

69% US POPULATION USES SOCIAL MEDIA



How Can Social Media Help Physicians?

In the last decade, the business world has changed dramatically. People are selecting physicians and dentists based on googling their business websites or reading patient reviews on sites such as Yelp. For example, the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported in its February 2011 Health Topics report that 44% of Internet users look for information about physicians and other health care professionals online. That number was even higher (51%) for Internet users between 34 and 45 years old. Not having an online presence can hurt your practice in the long run because it is becoming essential to attracting new patients *and* maintaining existing ones happy. You may be a fantastic physician with many awards, publications and an impeccable bedside manner, but without an online presence prospective patients will not know about your unique value proposition. Because medicine is very personal, people want to like a physician, or at least have a window into their personality, before they make an appointment. If doctors do not give potential patients an opportunity to learn about their practice first, patients will simply choose another physician who is more willing to engage.



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Customer Service

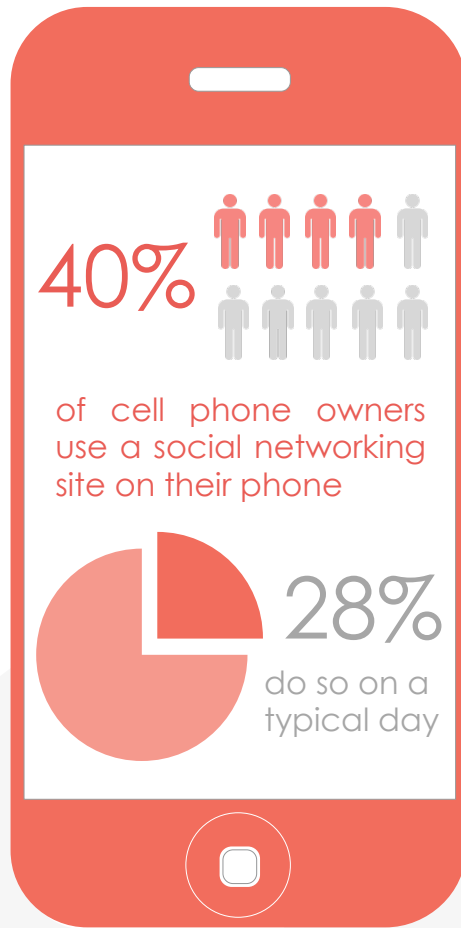
If you have an established respectable practice and are not in need of attracting new patients is it necessary to engage existing patients? In today's marketplace, it is a fallacy to assume that you will have repeat customers or patients based on the services being provided. Loyalty and trust have to be cultivated continuously and can be easily destroyed with one negative comment on a social media site. Additionally, most progressive physicians would argue that participation in social networks is an extension of the patient-doctor relationship virtually and is an opportunity to differentiate you from other physicians and share valuable medical information, not just from a clinical perspective, but from the overall engagement perspective. **In fact, 61% of patients say they trust information posted by physicians on social media**—social media allows physicians to empower their patients with correct information on pertinent medical trends and topics. Social media enables physicians, in return, to find out with little effort, what their patients care about. Natasha Burgert, a pediatrician who blogs at KC Kids Doc, writes that “offering online authenticity, genuine concern, and experience (sprinkled with a bit of sound medical knowledge) has created an amazingly powerful platform” for her practice. Furthermore, social media provides a channel for affirmative feedback from patients and to share their positive experience with their individual communities.

Patient Feedback

Responding quickly to negative comments and complaints can carry equal or more weight than positive consumer engagement. If a patient is unhappy with the level of care they received, it is fairly easy to set up a Facebook page to criticize a physician or dentist. You have to have an online presence and do damage control immediately. Unlike customer service issues brought to a practice's attention in a survey, complaints made on social media can be addressed — and often remedied — quickly because there is an outlet for a dialogue. Even though specific details should be kept offline, practices can respond in public with an apology and offer to correct the situation so that others can see action being taken. When social media users see that a problem is being handled right away, they come to realize that customer service is taken seriously.

Rx

Mobile Marketing



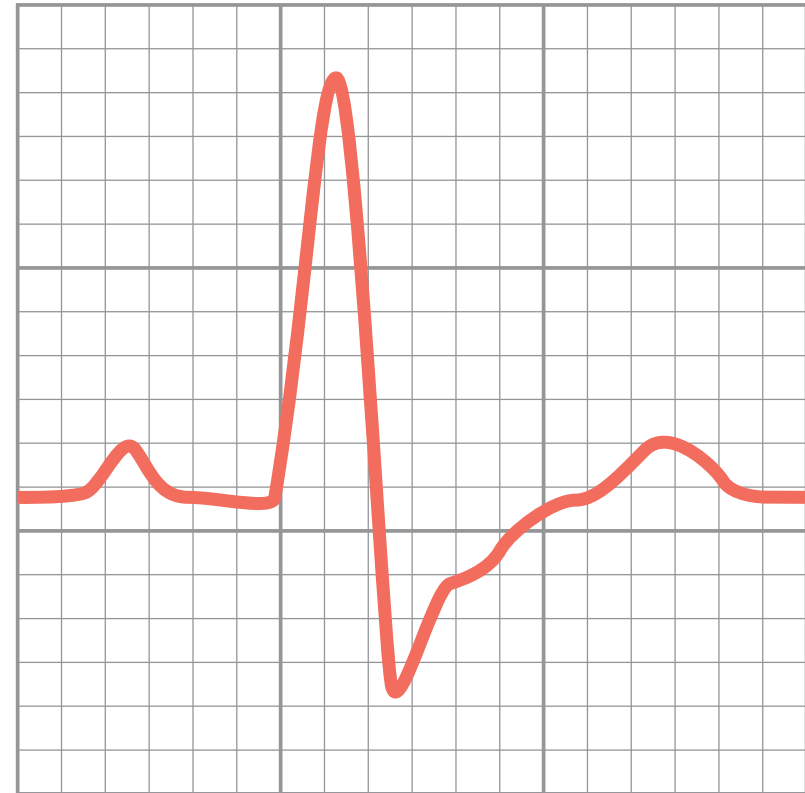
The growing ubiquity of cell phones, especially the rise of smartphones, has made social networking just a finger tap away. Fully 40% of cell phone owners use a social networking site on their phone, and 28% do so on a typical day. Women, young people, minorities, the highly educated and those with a higher annual household income are more likely to use social networking sites on their phones than other groups. This means that more people are accessing the web from their mobile device and connecting with brands on the fly than ever before. Location based services, such as Foursquare, Gowalla, Where and Facebook Places, use the geo-location functionality of a mobile phone or smart phone to provide people with information and entertainment in their particular location. Physicians and dentists, for example can use location-based services to tap into that on-the-go market by producing special offers, making it easy for your prospective patients to locate you and spread the word about your practice.



See The Ripples

Social media holds enormous potential to disseminate information, forge meaningful relationships and provide value to physicians and their practices in ways doctors may not have considered that are beyond traditional marketing. Although a small physician practice might not have the manpower to manage social media efforts, they are at an advantage when it comes to acting on information due to the smaller number of people making decisions. A smaller practice has the flexibility to implement a service immediately. Furthermore, small businesses have the option of outsourcing their social media and online marketing to a plethora of qualified and affordable social media services companies.

If you are dabbling with the idea of using social media for your practice, go ahead—dip your foot in the social media pool and you will be surprised by the ripples it produces.



Credits

About the Author

Nabeela Khatak grew up in the APPNA community and was one of the original founders of the Youth Forum and SAYA. She is presently a managing partner at [socialMpresa](#) with 20+ years of management consulting experience in the fields of technology, finance, marketing, public relations and nonprofits.

socialMpresa is a social media and marketing strategy company specializing in social media for medical and dental practices. If you wish to learn more about how your practice can benefit from social marketing please visit us at www.socialmpresa.com.

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