

The Value of Social Media for Dermatologists

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There have been 4 innovations in human history that have fundamentally changed the way we communicate: the printing press, the telephone and telegraph, television and radio, and social media (Clay Shirky, oral communication). Simply put, social media refers to Web-based tools and mobile technologies that allow people to connect and share information. Think of it as digital conversation that is not constrained by time and geography. Social media has irrevocably changed the way we communicate and also is changing our health care model. Consider our new lexicon; we talk about *e-patients* and *e-doctors*, *shared decision making*, *health care tweet chats*, and *online reputation*. These terms did not exist a few years ago and would not exist now without social media.

The worlds of both physicians and patients also have fundamentally changed. Before the Internet, the physician-patient relationship was predicated on an asymmetry of medical knowledge; physicians had sequestered all of the medical knowledge and patients were wholly dependent on us. Now, electronic tools have allowed for medical knowledge parity, which is not bad. Indeed, social media should be used to strengthen this new physician-patient relationship.

Now more than ever, high-quality customer service is the cornerstone of a successful business. Our patients deserve equally high customer service. We cannot provide top-quality service if we do not engage our patients online. In a study of 3014 adults, 72% of Internet users say they have searched for health information online within the last year.¹ We should be online helping patients find answers to their medical questions and providing accurate medical content.

Social media can be an effective marketing tool for your dermatology practice. When used well, social media offers a myriad of benefits, including building brand loyalty, creating positive word-of-mouth opportunities, acquiring new patients, strengthening ties with existing patients, becoming a trusted source for medical information, protecting your online reputation, and developing meaningful professional relationships. It also engages the right side of your brain, which for many dermatologists has been atrophied relative to the gene-memorizing, hypertrophic left side.

There are 3 main reasons for dermatologists to use social media: marketing your practice, cultivating patient relationships, and engaging in professional development opportunities.

Social media is the newest marketing tool. Although word of mouth has always driven commerce, Web sites such as Yelp and DrScore now enable patients to expand the reach of their recommendations. Doctorating Web sites are essentially social media forums that allow patients to connect and share information about you and your practice. Unlike traditional broadcast marketing, which relies on purchasing advertisements, social media marketing is more organic. By sharing blog posts, tweets, "pins," and status updates, you can continually market your practice while also burnishing your professional reputation.

Social media marketing is dependent on content creation and active online engagement. As a dermatologist, which social platforms should you use? Although there are no hard and fast rules, I recommend maintaining a Web site and/or blog for your practice that is constantly updated, as well as a YouTube or Vimeo channel, a Facebook business page, a Twitter account, and/or a Pinterest board (particularly for cosmetic dermatologists). Think of your practice's Web site and/or blog as your social media hub. All outgoing and incoming links will pass through here, bringing fresh eyes and new business to your practice. Unlike old-fashioned static Web sites, today's Web sites for medical practices are more dynamic, constantly providing creative original content to be shared on many social media platforms.

Whether you write your own blog posts or delegate them to an office assistant or professional writer, always post useful original content related to your practice, such as the procedures you specialize in, areas of medical expertise, features that are unique to your practice, and useful tips and information for patients. A blog that constantly is updated with customized posts will become a primary driver of traffic to your Web site, whereas buying prewritten blog posts that other physicians have on their Web sites will not strengthen your reputation or build brand loyalty.

Of course, not all Web content has to be written. Consider creating video content to post to a YouTube or Vimeo channel for your practice (eg, educational videos, staff biographies, patient testimonials,

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procedural demonstrations of laser treatment or tattoo removal). Videos do not have to be professionally produced; you can record them using a smartphone, but it is important that videos are always clear, concise, and engaging. According to PR Daily, Facebook users share videos 12 times more than links and text posts combined.² It appears that a consumer's appetite for online videos is exhaustive, as each month more than 1 billion unique users visit YouTube and watch more than 4 billion total hours of video.³

Another wildly popular social platform is Pinterest, a community for collecting and sharing images that reached 48.7 million users as of February 2013.⁴ Pinterest is an ideal platform for marketing your practice, educating patients, and building brand loyalty. The site allows users to create customized "boards" on which you can "pin" pictures of your office, yourself, and your staff, as well as before-and-after images (in compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, of course), skin care regimens, product recommendations, and much more. It is an increasingly powerful marketing and educational tool, one that many physicians have not started using yet, which represents a unique opportunity for you.

If you do not have a Facebook business page set up for your practice, consider creating one now. With 1.06 billion users,⁵ Facebook remains the behemoth of social media platforms. Your Facebook business page can be used to link to your blog, share newsworthy content, answer patient questions, and promote your practice. Your page also should include basic information such as your office location and hours; you also have the option to include interactive features such as a shopping cart.

Content sharing and online engagement also can help you cultivate patient relationships. Patients often are overwhelmed with information and are unable to discern medically accurate content on the Internet, which presents an opportunity for physicians to leverage social media. As dermatologists, we have a wealth of digitally circulated medical myths to dispel for patients, ranging from the dangers of tanning beds to the causes of acne. By using social media to share accurate information, you will help patients make educated decisions and also may become a trusted expert in your field. Over time, your patients and the online community at large will recognize you as an engaged, caring, and trustworthy physician, and perhaps may help you become an expert source for traditional news media.

Social media is not solely about your relationship with your patients; it also is about your relationship with your peers and your own professional development. Twitter, which allows users to create messages

up to 140 characters (known as tweets), is a powerful networking tool for physicians. Engaging in real-time conversations about breaking news, journal articles, and best practices can help you establish yourself as an expert in a particular area. Such interactions also may lead to speaking invitations, research opportunities, and collaborations you might never have imagined. I also advise dermatologists to become familiar with physician-only social networks such as Sermo where you can discuss clinical cases and practice management strategies as well as discover new professional opportunities.

As you become more comfortable using social media, you can explore more platforms. For instance, Instagram is an application that allows users to enhance and share photographs taken with a smartphone; you also might decide to try Google+ Hangouts (a video chat feature) or start a blog on Tumblr. Over time, you will discover the platforms that are best for you and your practice. You may choose to drop Twitter and work on enhancing your Pinterest boards or realize that you are a natural at creating videos and start expanding your YouTube channel.

Whichever social media platforms you choose to use, remember that just as you cannot contract out fulfilling your continuing medical education requirements, you cannot contract out your social media presence. These tools are technological enhancements of real, person-to-person interactions. Your patients know and respect you because they have built relationships with you; the same is true of your online presence. Engaging in social media is not difficult, but it does take time, patience, and commitment, which are traits quite familiar to physicians.

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