



Social Media for Podiatrists

Welcome to the new age of marketing.

BY MARK TERRY

Social media is a relatively new concept, which is to say, it has probably been around for about a decade. Although you could argue that AOL was the inventor of chat rooms*, most people probably credit Myspace with being the first real “social media” as the concept is used today. Myspace was founded in 2003.

Today, social media has many platforms, with the dominant platforms currently being Facebook and Twitter. We will also briefly discuss Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube and blogs. For the sake of this article, social media will be defined as Internet-based platforms that allow individuals to create, share or exchange information in virtual communities and/or networks. This is certainly not comprehensive, but it will briefly describe the most dominant social media platforms.

A Brief Overview

Facebook

Launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, and a few others, the site was initially created

“wall,” which is to say, the page you view when you go on Facebook. It allows users to post pictures and share and “like” posts. Although it started at the university level, like many things in social media, it evolved.

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as a membership website for their fellow Harvard students. The key trigger at the time was apparently that each user’s profile had a “relationship status” indicator, which allowed college students to look for dates. The other people in each user’s network were dubbed “friends” and messages appeared on the user’s

The most common demographic for Facebook now is over the age of 40.

Twitter

Perhaps the most maddening form of social media to get a handle on, Twitter allows users to send and read messages that are 140

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characters long. The users access it through a website interface or mobile device. Hashtags (#) are used to denote search terms. A message is called a “tweet.” Photographs are often put up, and the most practical usage for Twitter is the use of abbreviated URLs that can be generated on services like TinyURL.com, Bitly or Google URL shortener. These services take long URLs and shorten them in order to accommodate whatever content is tweeted. For the uninitiated, scanning through a Twitter feed can be like taking a quick walk through an enormous cocktail party, catching snatches of conversation. It was founded in 2006. The demographics tend to run young, dominated by teenagers and twenty-somethings.

Pinterest

Another social media site, Pinterest is dubbed a “visual discovery, collection, sharing, and storage tool.” It tends to be more a collection of images, as if “pinning” them to a virtual bulletin board. Users save and share pins based on pretty much whatever they’re interested in. Demographically, in 2012, 83 percent of the global users were women. It was launched in 2010.

Instagram

Instagram, launched in 2010, is similar to Pinterest in that its focus is mobile photo-sharing and video-sharing, with a social networking component. It’s fairly straightforward to link Instagram accounts to other social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and one not really addressed here—Tumblr. The maximum video length is 15 seconds.

YouTube

Most people, even if they’re unfamiliar with Twitter or other types of social media, are familiar with YouTube, which is a video-sharing website. It was launched in 2005 and, a year later, was bought by Google for \$1.65 billion. Essentially, YouTube allows users to upload, view, and share videos. People can create and subscribe to various YouTube channels. A possible social-media aspect

SIDEBAR I: Best Practices

- 1) Set guidelines.
- 2) Don’t post or write anything you would not want your mother to read!
- 3) Pay attention to security settings. Limit who can post.
- 4) Use and modify your platforms regularly.
- 5) Stay neutral and positive.
- 6) Link your social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.).
- 7) Keep it short.
- 8) Absolutely never, under any circumstances, provide specific medical advice on social media. •

is that viewers can (if the account holder sets it up that way) comment on the videos.

Blogs

Short for “web log,” the term has been around long enough to make it into Merriam-Webster, which defines it as “a Web site that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer.” The first usage of the term was 1999.

Others

Every time you turn around, there’s some new trend in social media. AOL and Myspace are still hanging around, nowhere as popular as they used to be. Google created its own community to compete with Facebook called Google+. It’s safe to say that Google+ as a competitor with Facebook has been a total failure, but it seems to be doing a pretty good job of replacing the Yellow Pages. If you look at the list of social networking websites on Wikipedia (which, by some definitions, is social media), the list is enormous. Some of the slightly more common platforms include Classmates.com, CafeMom, deviantART, epernicus, Flixster, Flickr, LinkedIn, Friendster, Goodreads, and Ning. Many of these are geared toward niche audiences.

Why Should Podiatrists Use Social Media?

The answer to this question is

rather simple—it’s where the people are at. Just to throw out some figures supplied, again, by Wikipedia:

Name	Active Users
Facebook	1.39 billion
Google +	540 million
Instagram	300 million
Twitter	284 million

“From a marketing and educational standpoint, yes, I am in favor of physicians using social media in today’s environment,” says Lynn Homisak, owner of SOS Healthcare Management Solutions (Seattle, WA). “In the tech-driven world we live in, you would be considered ‘not with it’ if you don’t participate on some level. More importantly, we don’t educate patients nearly enough about podiatry, treated conditions, the power of proper shoe wear, office policy, etc. Social media is an incredibly cost-effective way to reach out to the public in this regard.



Lynn Homisak

Some people express concern regarding careful use of social media and exactly what it should be used for. “It can be a marketing tool,” says Ron Sterling of Sterling Solutions, Ltd. (Silver Spring, MD), “but you have to differentiate between a mar-

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keting tool and a patient service tool. It can be a great marketing tool.”

But tread carefully. Larry Kosova, DPM, of the Family Podiatry Center (Naperville, IL), has some caveats.



Dr. Kosova

“I think you have to be the type of person that enjoys interacting with people, not just to gain patients. It’s useful for marketing and education, and if it’s used for education by people close by, they could become patients. But if you’re a doctor who does it poorly, and don’t keep up with it, don’t do it. What does it look like to a patient who looks at your account and sees you haven’t touched it in months?”

Be Careful!

Be aware that social media can be a minefield. Larry Maurer, DPM (Kirkland, WA), who is a very adept user of social media, says, “For communicating medical information with patients—I’m against it. It dilutes the process and encourages misinformation. I’m against talking on the telephone for the same reason. Come into the office and talk. I’m against medical communication with patients

about practices where various people post or the accounts aren’t monitored appropriately. “Have a marketing committee approve any postings to ensure the practice is being promoted properly. Don’t assume it will be handled properly.”

Zetter noted that he had recently received a tweet from a client’s Twitter account that was actually an older, unused account. It had been hacked, and weight loss and prescription links were being sent out. “Monitor and verify all accounts and postings.”

Although this will be repeated in the best practices section, Kosova says, “Don’t give medical advice. It’s worth emphasizing that HIPAA is key. There are lawyers lurking, and they’re not your friends. Even if it’s a patient of yours, don’t answer on an open forum. That’s leading to treating over the Internet. Just tell them to contact you at the office. Doctors are facing lawsuits, even when they’re not using the patient’s name.”

It’s hard to say how those types of lawsuits will shake out, but why put yourself in the way of a nuisance lawsuit?

Social Media Best Practices for Physicians

Before discussing best practices, let’s admit that some people should

“But if you’re a doctor who does [social media] poorly, and don’t keep up with it, don’t do it.”—Kosova

on social media.” Maurer notes that he has a sports medicine practice, so he tends to look at a younger audience.

David Zetter, of Zetter Healthcare Management Consultants (Mechanicsburg, PA) thinks physicians should use social media. “More and more patients are on board with social media, and any practice that wants longevity should adopt these practices and opportunities to communicate better and more often with their patients.” However, he is cautious

just stay off social media. It’s okay. Although some of the individuals interviewed for this article felt that social media was the way to go, others felt that, in some cases, it might just be better to leave it alone or hire it out to people who know what they’re doing. Kosova says, “Absolutely they should stay off it if they don’t want it. You have to be the right kind of person or have someone on staff who is the right kind of person who gets social media.”

Homisak is more on a tightrope.

SIDEBAR 2

*For people interested in digging into the history of social media, the first creation of social media was probably Open Diary, which was the first blogging community. It was launched in October of 1998 by Bruce Abelson. Abelson was way ahead of his time and Open Diary was very successful and very much pre-dated Myspace and Facebook. It never took off the way Twitter or Facebook, or even Myspace did, but it hosted more than five million diaries. Open Diary officially shut down in February 2014.

As something of an addendum to a discussion of social media and the Internet, AOL, Open Diary and Myspace as three examples of how quickly things can change on the Internet. It’s worthwhile to keep in mind that AOL was founded in 1983 and for several years essentially dominated the exact same space that Google does today. Google, be warned! And in between AOL and Google, there was Yahoo! The one thing we can count on in the Internet age is change. •

She points out that a Pew Internet survey found that more than half of all adults online are 65 and older and use Facebook. That number represents 31 percent of all seniors, i.e., you have to go where the people are. “Yes,” says Homisak. “There are risks. Know them and avoid them. If you ‘dabble,’ and fail to keep the content interesting, educational, and professional—the advantages are small.”

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Zetter offers six goals of social media that might also be considered best practices. They are:

- Provide valuable clinical information for the general population.
- Communicate what sets your practice or you apart from others.
- Utilize patient testimonials if they will participate.
- Build a following.
- Mention social media vehicles in all advertising and visa versa.
- Communicate new services, new physicians, etc.

Getting Creative

In terms of marketing efforts, social media seems to benefit—in a global manner—from creativity. There are repeated cases of people trying something new and original on social media and having it go viral—not just in podiatry or medicine, but anywhere. What follows are some suggestions for various types of media, but you're primarily limited by your imagination.

Lynn Homisak says, "In much the same way that educational videos are used in our offices, social media can share with the public certain surgical procedures, new equipment and its effectiveness, a video tour of the office, etc. This gives patients an understanding of procedures, recovery, and outcomes."

She provides eight things practices can utilize social media for:

- Promote products they sell in the office.
- Share PR stories, for example, a doctor's humanitarian efforts.
- Announce and invite the public to attend health fairs they participate in.
- Engage patients in promotional contests and giveaways.
- Publicize charity events such as shoe drives, sock collections, etc.
- Inform the public about celebrities in the news suffering with foot/ankle problems.
- Advertise job openings.
- Encourage the best foot health.

Maurer has an interesting sideline—sports photography. Much of his social media content is related to

his photography, which is focused on Instagram, [@rundocor], but anything he posts on Instagram is set up to feed out to all his other social media platforms. "People come to my feeds for the sports photography, but you get people to come in and look at something else. Nobody wants to go to Instagram for podiatry—it's about candy-colored pictures."

But from his Instagram source and other feeds, he has a significant audience. So he can run contests there, giving away tickets to sport-

ticles and booklets, which become a component of Internet marketing. Then, once you have their contact information, you can gently and appropriately begin a long-term marketing approach."

Jackson points out that the typical direct mail campaign is enormously successful if it has a 2 percent response rate. "But conversations for social content often have responses of 20 percent and as high as 50 percent if they request information, over time, and it's usually from

Direct people to your website or offer articles and booklets, which become a component of Internet marketing.

ing events. He says, "Twitter is even better. Some kid with 4,000 contacts re-tweets, five of those re-tweet, etc. I once had 400 re-tweets for one contest." Unfortunately, Maurer hasn't found Facebook to be terribly useful for contests. "But do something interesting, offer something interesting, and that keeps you on the top of their mind. It's brand awareness."

Rem Jackson, who is bullish on all social media, notes that the public is very interested in sports figures and celebrities. He cites podiatrists who have used social media to discuss Alex Trebek's Achilles' tendon problems and Victoria Beckham's bunions as examples. But Jackson thinks you need to use social media in a fairly holistic manner. If you have a good blog, make sure there are links to it in your practice's website, or even better, make sure the blog is integrated into the practice's website. But the next step, not surprisingly, is the Call To Action.

Jackson's clients have had great success by self-publishing chapbooks related to podiatry topics, or relevant articles, and providing a little information on social media and then indicating they should contact the doctor to receive the book. "People like to have things sent to them. It helps build your database. Direct people to your website or offer ar-

a smaller, focused group."

He refers to The Four Pillars of marketing. They are:

- Web-based marketing
- Referral marketing
- Internal marketing
- External marketing

Social media falls cleanly into web-based marketing, but because of its ability to reach so many people in an inexpensive way, and so many people have access to it on their smartphones, as well as their laptops, desktop computers, and tablet devices, it can easily fall into all categories of marketing.

"Social media is like some kind of gift from Mt. Olympus," says Jackson. "We should be really, really excited to have the ability to reach so many patients at such a low cost." **PM**



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