

MEDICINE on the Net[®]

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- The International Osteoporosis Foundation is dedicated to the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of osteoporosis worldwide. Its Web site offers a variety of resources and information for users.

What are you doing? Twitter-using hospitals have the answer

by Cynthia Johnson

When my father-in-law suggested I start using Twitter (www.twitter.com) to keep in touch with relatives on the West Coast, I wasn't surprised. He's not your stereotypical father-in-law. He drives a tractor-trailer along the coast of California, delivering produce for a living. Drive by him on the freeway and you'd never guess that his big rig is a rolling epicenter of the latest in wireless gadgets. When he's not downloading audio books and podcasts, he often provides me with great fodder for my MON columns, as was the case when he introduced me to Twitter.

Twitter is a free social networking tool developed in 2006 by a San Francisco company of the same name. It allows users to send updates, known as tweets, and read other users' updates. Tweets are posts of 140 characters or fewer that answer a simple question: "What are you doing?" The updates display on the user's profile page and are delivered to other users, also known as followers, who have subscribed to them.

In this issue, MON profiles three organizations with a presence on Twitter and the unique ways they are using the tool.

Using Twitter as a patient outreach tool

San Diego-based Scripps Health began using Twitter in May 2008 with much success. Recently, it passed the 1,000 follower mark. Marc Needham, Web director at Scripps Health, says Scripps' followers are mostly



healthcare organizations, medical device manufacturers, the media, and people in the community interested in medicine and healthcare.

"We're seeing our news stories read; we're seeing traffic being driven to our Web site; we're seeing a new way to interact with our patients, which is really very interesting," says Needham. "If people are interested in trying new things and innovating a little bit, Twitter is a great venue to do that."

The organization originally decided to use Twitter as a syndication channel for its news and events. However, since starting to use it, Scripps has seen other areas of utility and growth and is finding new ways to apply the tool.

Twitter

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“It was a medium that we saw growing in popularity,” says Needham. “It allows you to experiment very easily.”

Scripps recently turned to Twitter when it was seeking patients to fill clinical trials by entering an update that asked interested patients with particular conditions to contact the hospital.

“We’ve got some interest in studies based on the clinical trial information being passed around from user to user through Twitter, which was kind of cool,” Needham says. “Clinical trials for different conditions can be very difficult to keep full.”

Needham monitors the Scripps account and runs sets of saved searches, looking for Scripps-related terms entered by users. On occasion, he has reached out to Twitter users who have mentioned the hospital in relation to parking difficulties, billing issues, or job searches.

The hospital also plans to use Twitter to post disaster recovery updates. If a disaster happens, the organization’s Web site will direct visitors to its Twitter feed, where it will update the news more frequently, allowing people without access to the Internet to receive alerts and updates via their mobile phones.

Needham says his colleagues in healthcare are excited about Twitter. However, he says he is trying to be



pragmatic about the tool. “There’s a very narrow segment of our patient base that’s on Twitter right now,” he says. “The key is finding ways to reach out to those people in ways they are comfortable with.”

In addition to Twitter, the organization also uses Facebook. Needham says he expected the hospital’s Facebook page to be more popular than the Twitter account, but he has found that it has languished.

“The Twitter presence is more of a communication tool, whereas we have built a community with Facebook and use it more from an HR perspective,” he says. “There’s a definite difference in the tone and tenor of the two places.”

Dr. Twitter to the OR—stat!

Detroit-based Henry Ford Health System has been using Twitter since fall 2008, says **William Ferris**, manager of Web services. It now has more than 2,000 Twitter followers.

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“My real intention on using Twitter was from a customer service perspective,” says Ferris. “We wanted to be able to listen to what our customers and patients were saying and to be able to respond to it if there were any type of service recovery issues. Healthcare is an intimate experience, and there’s often a disconnect between the patients receiving care and a big institution. Any time you can make a patient or an institution feel more connected, I think both sides can benefit.”

The organization got a lot of press after it became the first hospital to Twitter a surgery in January in conjunction with a surgical conference taking place in Las Vegas.

“We were looking for ways to help promote the conference,” says Ferris. “The surgery at Henry Ford Hospital was being broadcasted to the conference attendees. Because it was being broadcasted already, we decided to Twitter it.”

The surgeon directly involved in the case is not the one who uses Twitter during the surgery, notes Ferris. The organization has a resident or chief resident who is brought in specifically to Twitter. Often, the resident would have been in the operating room observing anyway, Ferris says.

“They give a play-by-play and answer questions from other Twitter users during the surgery,” he says.

The hospital seeks consent from the patient before it Twitters any surgery and is careful not to reveal any patient information.

Henry Ford also uses an RSS feed to generate tweets and links automatically. The organization searches for users mentioning it on Twitter, and if there are any mentions by the media, it posts a tweet with a link to the article for Twitter followers to read.

At St. Louis Children’s Hospital, ROI = positive patient interactions

“Social networking gives us new ways to engage with and listen to our customers,” says **John Odom**, Web content coordinator at St. Louis Children’s Hospital. “Being in pediatrics, I think we have an advantage over adult hospitals. Our primary demographic is parents, roughly aged 21 to 45. That generation has more quickly adopted social media. How they want to interact with healthcare organizations is going to help drive what type of interactions we can help provide them.”



St. Louis’ goals for social networking fit into three general categories, Odom says. It is interested in generating more awareness for the hospital, supporting branding of the hospital, and engaging with and listening to its customers.

It is difficult to evaluate the return on investment (ROI) that results from using Twitter and other social networking tools. “Some of our traditional desire for metrics and ROI may not apply as perfectly as it does with some of the other marketing initiatives,” Odom says. “What really matters most are positive patient interactions, and that’s going to be hard to measure.”

But even if the interaction is negative, Odom says it allows the hospital the unique opportunity to have a conversation with its customers.

“If someone had a great experience, that’s fantastic,” he says. “If they didn’t have the best experience, we can interact with them and find out more information. In the past, these conversations happened privately, whether you were out to dinner with friends or meeting your neighbor. So many people have now turned online, and if they choose to interact with us, it gives us a chance to engage with and listen to our customers.”

The hospital’s Twitter audience consists primarily of hospitals, healthcare professionals, and media members, says Odom.

On Facebook, he finds that the hospital’s fans include more patients, families, and staff members.

Currently, the hospital relies on word of mouth to drive people to its social networking tools. It plans on creating a social media page that gives Web visitors information on how to access the facility through the tools. St. Louis is also actively looking at ways to make its Web site more social media-friendly.

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Twitter

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“I think it’s how you tie it into a bigger Web strategy and some of the other social media tools you have,” Odom says. “I think we have a different set of challenges with social media than other industries do, because of HIPAA laws. That does limit the type of interactions that we could have with patients, but I also don’t think that’s a big enough limiting factor that hospitals couldn’t find really positive ways to interact with their customers.”

Ready to tweet?

Twitter is a simple social networking tool that organizations can deploy quickly and easily. An organization can


post updates and actively interact with its customers as appropriate.

Or, it can be a virtual fly on the wall and monitor what other users are saying about it.

From tweeting surgeries to searching for clinical trial participants, how you use Twitter is up to the unique needs of your organization.

If your organization isn’t ready to start tweeting, consider setting up an account for your personal use to explore the features of the site.

When your organization is ready, you’ll have some experience tweeting.

And while you are exploring Twitter, don’t forget to follow HealthLeaders Media—we’re located at <http://twitter.com/healthleaders>. 

Twitter: A strong social networking tool

“We’re seeing our news stories read; we’re seeing traffic being driven to our Web site; we’re seeing a new way to interact with our patients, which is really very interesting. If people are interested in trying new things and innovating a little bit, Twitter is a great venue to do that.”

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Tweet tips

» Remember that updates need 140 characters or less

- » Note that you can send direct messages to people whom you follow
- » Make use of your existing RSS feeds when you use Twitter
- » Monitor your Twitter presence, responding to customers when appropriate
- » Consider using Twitter to distribute disaster recovery updates, recruit clinical trial participants, promote upcoming events, announce press releases, keep track of your competitors, post job openings, suggest health tips, or provide users with a play-by-play of your most recent procedures
- » Create a social media page that provides users with a method to access all of the social networking tools your organization uses
- » Direct followers to news stories about your organization using links

Twitter 101

- » Tweet: An update posted on Twitter.
- » Follower: Someone who has opted to receive your Twitter updates.
- » RT: Retweet. This happens when a user posts someone else’s tweet so followers can see it.
- » DM: Direct message.
- » OH: Overheard.