

Build a Web-Centric Culture for Your Physicians

BY THOMAS C. LAWRY

Today the average health care consumer gets more health and medical information from the Internet than from his or her own physician.¹ As the time consumers spend in actual conversation with doctors shrinks, they are turning increasingly to the Web—and expecting their physicians to follow them. In fact, many consumers have become so attached to the Web, they are willing to change physicians just to deal with them through that medium. A recent study indicates that 63 percent would switch to a doctor who offered online content, appointment scheduling, or secure two-way communication between patient and physician.² Physicians are inundated these days with questions concerning information their patients have found on the Internet. And even though they know they are falling behind in the online health care revolution, most doctors recognize its importance. According to one study, 59 percent of the physicians surveyed believe that, in the long run, the Internet will radically improve communications between them and their patients.³

Hospitals thus have a wonderful opportunity to help physicians improve their understanding and use of the Web. In doing so, hospitals should set two goals:

- Improving service to patients
- Strengthening the bond between physicians and the hospital

In creating a physician-centric Web culture in hospitals, the options range from simple activities, on one hand, to complex process improvement initiatives, on the other. If you are a hospital leader who is thinking about developing a website for your facility, here are five tips you may find useful.

INVOLVE PHYSICIANS IN WEBSITE PLANNING

Do not forget to involve physicians. Their experience in the examination room helps them see things from patients' perspective. Doctors can benefit as well because their participation in the planning process will provide them with a safe, easy opportunity to learn about the Web.



*Mr. Lawry is
president, Verus,
Bellevue, WA.*

Be sure to include physicians as members of the Web steering committee. Look for doctors who are interested in learning about the Web; being "Internet savvy" should not be a requirement for membership, however. Try to recruit physicians who represent the specialties on staff.

By sharing their medical knowledge, physicians can help your marketing and information services departments develop (or acquire) site content that the people you serve will find credible and relevant. Indeed, site content should never be developed without physicians' advice. Involving them makes it more likely that the content will be both clinically correct and credible among those staff physicians who recommend it to their patients. Then, too, involving physicians gives them a greater sense of ownership of the site.

USE THE WEBSITE AS A TOOL FOR PHYSICIANS

On one hand, physicians today are besieged by patients seeking trustworthy online health information. On the other hand, many comprehensive hospital websites go unused because physicians are unaware of the services available on them. Obviously, doctors and websites could be helping each other out.

After all, a hospital website is a natural place for physicians to direct patients looking for health and medical content. Patients wanting to learn more about a specialist, for example, could be referred to the site's physician directory. The site could also be the place where patients are sent for admitting or postdischarge instructions or other useful information.

To introduce doctors to your website, make a presentation about it at a medical staff meeting. Remember, however, that physicians will care little about the site's marketing value. Be sure to focus on those aspects of the site that are useful to them or their patients.

To introduce patients to the site, print postcards announcing it and distribute the cards among physicians' office waiting rooms. Provide

Continued on page 14

office staff members with an outline of the website content so that they can advise patients how to locate and use the site.

HELP PHYSICIANS LEARN TO USE THE INTERNET

Some physicians—perhaps those more resistant to change than others—will need help in getting started using the Internet. To ease their way, some hospitals have launched Web training programs designed to teach doctors and their staffs how, for example, to use e-mail or locate information relevant to their practices on the Internet.

You might try this at your facility. By aligning such training with physicians' own interests, you will increase the chances that they will take the time to participate in the program. Limit the training sessions to two hours or less, however. And be sure to schedule the sessions so that they do not interfere with the physicians' peak practice hours.

Or you might have your facility offer a day-long, intensive training session for physicians. Last year PeaceHealth in Bellevue, WA, conducted a one-day program called "The Role of the Internet for the Practicing Physician." Held on a Saturday, the program showed more than 100 doctors a variety of fundamental Web applications (including how to use e-mail to communicate with patients), each of which they could immediately put to use.

If you are considering such training, first determine the type that would best serve the needs of your medical staff. Think about providing continuing medical education credits as an incentive to participate.

CREATE AN ONLINE PORTAL FOR PHYSICIANS

One of the best ways to get physicians online is by providing them with an application they find professionally useful. Many hospitals are beginning to offer a range of such services—including clinical guidelines, online reference materials, "downloadable" forms for use by physicians' office staffs, access to laboratory results, and e-mail to and from hospital departments and staff.

If you plan to offer such services, be sure to link them together through a central, easy-to-use interface or portal. Busy physicians do not like to spend time searching among scattered online services. If they are not given a central portal, they will probably not use the services.

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HELP PHYSICIANS INTEGRATE CLINICAL, BUSINESS SERVICES

Physicians are seeking ways to streamline the clinical and business aspects of their practices. Web services can help them do that. On the clinical side, Web services exist that enable a doctor (or his staff) to communicate with patients, schedule appointments, and write prescriptions, among other things. On the business side, such services enable physicians to verify eligibility, process preauthorizations, make referrals to specialists, and submit claims.

When effectively deployed, these services can improve medical practice processes significantly, thereby saving time and money. But they also require a considerable investment in information systems and a change in practice management.

FOUR BASIC RULES

Hospitals can play an important role in facilitating physicians use of Web services. Here are four basic rules to keep in mind:

- Identify and recruit several key physician "champions" for each Web initiative. Once you have their commitment, use their time judiciously. Do not expect them to do busywork.
- Routinely communicate your plans and progress to your medical staff leaders and, through them, to the general medical staff.
- Be prepared to show physicians how Web initiatives increase efficiencies, improve care, and benefit patients. Look for ways to quantify these positive results.
- Be prepared, if your Web initiative is hospital sponsored and produces significant results to physicians on staff, to complete a legal review to ensure that the site's activities are in compliance with fraud and abuse regulations. □

☎ Contact Tom Lawry at telawry@verus-tech.com, or at 4628 175 Ave., SE, Bellevue, WA 98006; phone 425-643-7117; fax 206-643-0302.

NOTES

1. 2000 Solucient/Scarborough HealthPlus Survey.
2. Jupiter Research Consumer Survey.
3. Cyber Dialogue/Deloitte Consulting Physician Survey, December 2000.

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