Seven Strategies for Building Effective Online Relationships

BY THOMAS C. LAWRY

Many hospitals and physicians today face serious financial challenges because of managed care and reimbursement shortfalls from programs such as Medicare. They respond to these challenges by cutting costs. But such efforts have a negative impact on staffing levels, inevitably reducing the time caregivers can spend with patients.

As a result, consumers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their lack of access to physicians and other caregivers. Many, seeking information about medical conditions they or their loved ones face, turn to the Web. Smart health care organizations are following these consumers online. By using their own websites to provide information and publicize services, such organizations can establish (or reinforce) relationships that eventually lead consumers to use the services themselves.

Today the total online population is growing by two million new users every month.[1] Seventy-three million Americans—62 percent of Internet users—have gone on line in search of health information.[2] About six million Americans go online for medical advice on a typical day—more on any given day, according to the American Medical Association, than visit health professionals.[3]

Not only are health consumers turning to the Web; the information they find there is influencing their interactions with physicians and hospitals. Two-thirds of the older people who have gone online for health information report that they later talked over what they found there with their physicians. Half of the older people who seek online health information say they are more satisfied with their treatment as a result of their searches.[4]

SEVEN STRATEGIES

The wonderful thing about the Web is that it can be used to create one-on-one relationships with thousands of people at a time. It's an efficient means of delivering "moment of need" information and services that, moreover, can be personal-

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ized to fit the needs of the particular individual involved.

Although most hospitals today possess a website, few have sites designed to, first, provide consumers with an online experience that meets their information needs, and, second, lead to a relationship that support the hospital's mission and objectives.

What follow are seven strategies for creating effective online relationships.

Provide Information that Consumers Consider Relevant and Valuable This sounds simple, but most hospital websites today miss the mark. They provide a lot of information—but not much that consumers themselves judge to be valuable.

The information that consumers consider valuable is any concerning health issues or an actual medical condition that *they or a loved one* face at that time. Hospitals commonly make the mistake of providing on their sites a wide variety of health topics, but little depth about any given medical condition. Although most Internet users have at some time gone online to seek health information, three out of four do so only when they have specific questions about a medical condition.[5] Hospitals that develop or license health content that is (as the saying goes) "a mile wide and an inch deep" fail to address the real needs of the online health care consumer.

Consumers also find value in information and services that make interacting with health providers more convenient, less time consuming, and less expensive. They consider a site valuable if it makes them feel better informed and more capable of making good decisions.

Focus on Supporting Key Services Health care websites that attempt to be "all things to all people" tend to be irrelevant to health care consumers. An effective Web strategy starts by providing comprehensive information (and an online experience the consumer will find useful) about three to five of the key services the hospital provides.

Of course, most hospitals have limited resources to spend on their websites. They will

spend their money more effectively if, rather than trying to publicize all their services, they concentrate on doing a good job of explaining and promoting their top services.

When selecting those top services, the site designers should consider the hospital's strategic plan, the hospital services that produce the highest margins, the facility's competitive position in the marketplace, and existing service line growth targets.

Don't Just Talk about Services Online—Provide Them Unlike print media and television, sites on the Web can actually *provide* services.

• The website for PeaceHealth (www.peace-health.org), a five-hospital system in Bellevue, WA, enables users to interact with their physicians, get prescriptions refilled, schedule appointments, and review information in their medical records.

• The site for Holy Name Hospital, Teaneck, NJ (www.holyname.org), makes it possible for women to sign up for mammography reminders and schedule mammograms.

By catering to the consumer's convenience, such sites create an online relationship that can eventually lead him or her to seek the hospital's services. When designers consider the possible services they will publicize on their hospital's site, they should choose those that the site can make more convenient for the consumer while, at the same time, reducing process steps, response time, or costs to the organization.

Create Online Relationships by Starting with a "Signal Event" A "signal event" occurs when a consumer is initially given information about a health condition that is potentially life changing. It may be positive: A woman learns that she is pregnant. It may be negative: A man learns he has diabetes. In either case, the person involved will be strongly motivated to acquire information about the medical condition and its treatment options.

A hospital website should be prepared to guide the newly diagnosed consumer to the information that he or she needs to begin researching the diagnosis and assessing treatment options. This will also be an ideal opportunity for the site to educate users about the services the hospital provides and to showcase the physicians and staff they will very likely be turning to for help.

Website content concerning a specific medical condition should always be directly tied to explaining the hospital's services and the capabilities of the physicians specializing in that condition. The site's design should be intuitive, lead-

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ing even novice users to information about treatment options and the services the hospital provides.

When Building Online Relationships, Involve Those Who Bring the Patients A hospital's website will—even if well-funded and strategically shrewd—be of little value if it lacks the input, awareness, and ownership of physicians and other clinicians. Designers should not be in such a rush to develop their site that they fail to involve physicians, nurses, and other caregivers in helping to assess consumer needs and determine the kind of information consumers are likely to seek.

The Internet is a worldwide medium, whereas most hospitals provide services to people living within a defined region. One goal of a hospital website should be attracting what are referred to as "qualified users"—a local person who happens to be dealing with a medical or health issue. The best way to attract qualified users is to ensure that physicians and other caregivers have had input into the information on the site so that they can recommend it to their patients.

A well-developed hospital website also produces value for physicians, who are typically inundated with questions from patients about where to go online for credible health information. Make your physicians aware of the contents of your site and ask them to help promote it to patients.

Use a "Clicks and Mortar" Approach to Your Web Services A website's design, content, and applications should be geared toward turning information seekers into service users when the need arises.

Once a user has become familiar with the site content and information about the hospital's services, he or she should be encouraged to take some type of action. In fact, the site should provide an easy way for the user to take action. The goal is to have a motivated user contact the organization for more information or a consultation. This can be done through a secure e-mail link or an online form. A toll-free telephone number that ties back to a call center is another easy way to connect web users to the facility.

Be careful, however. Online users who are given the number for the hospital's main switchboard can easily be lost in the shuffle. So, too, are users given the e-mail address of a webmaster who is not in a position to provide timely follow-up on medical service matters.

Take Advantage of the Fact that, Even in a "Wired World," Health Care Is *Local* Although thousands of health

care websites are available to consumers, hospitals have the distinct advantage of being seen as local sources of credible and trustworthy information. To profit from this advantage, a hospital must understand that online information seekers usually go through a two-step process.

Web users who have just been diagnosed as being ill will initially search the Web for the best available information about that illness. Once they have gathered specific information about the illness and its treatment options, they will begin exploring the treatments and services available in the region. It is at this crucial moment that a well- organized health care website can make a difference. By providing information about treatments offered and success rates, profiles of physician specialists, and descriptions of support services, a hospital site can help reduce consumers' anxiety and increase their loyalty to the hospital. Although a hospital website cannot take the place of face-to-face contact with a caregiver, it can be an alternative that provides consumers with easy access to information and services that they consider important. If done right, a site will provide a cost-effective means of extending the services beyond the walls of the organization.   □

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NOTES

1. U.S. Department of Commerce, "A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet," available at www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/anationline2.pdf.
2. Pew Internet & American Life Project, March 2, 2002, p. 4, available at www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Vital_DecisionsMay2002.pdf.
3. Pew Internet & American Life Project.
4. National Institute of Health press release, January 1999, available at www.nlm.nih.gov.
5. National Institute of Health.

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ronment and aim to reduce falls and other injuries. The network works with hospital discharge planners to facilitate post-acute support for discharged patients. In addition, the two network-developed free clinics for the homeless and uninsured are projected to have more than 3,700 visits this year.

The Parish Nursing Network also continues to focus on seniors through disease management and creation of a Parish Nursing Network card that alerts caregivers to support that can be accessed through the network and in the community.

NEXT STEP: SCHOOLS
Because of its early success in parishes, St. Joseph's is expanding offerings into the schools. As with the churches, each school establishes a health team based on the assets available at the school or in the school district.

Annual planning occurs within each school, with goals set and programs implemented. Programs vary from basic health educational classes to case management and support of asthmatic children or those with food allergies. There are now more than 90 schools (nearly half of those in the county) in 19 of 21 school districts in Macomb County, the third-largest county in Michigan.

Last year alone, the School Health Program had more than 170,000 contacts with students and parents, according to Deanna Culberson, RN, St. Joseph's director of school health and the Center for Health Management.

The School Health Program has been recognized as a "Best Practice Vocational Educational Program" by Michigan's Department of Career Development. Each year, 50 high school students do rotations in more than 40 hospital departments, including nursing units, emergency departments, and human resources. In the three years since its inception, more than 25 students have been hired by St. Joseph's, and many more changed their career choices to nursing and other health professions.

The School Health Program also offers weight management for obese adolescents. (Macomb County is the most obese county in Michigan, which is the second heaviest state in the country, behind Wisconsin.) This program is expected to help thousands of students and generate revenue for St. Joseph's.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER
The average cost of each contact through these initiatives is about $2. Despite a reduced marketing budget, St. Joseph's continues its position as a wellness leader based on a recent community survey.

"Marketing, public relations, health education, and community outreach should remain connected and synergistic," advises Adler. "These activities must support the entire enterprise and not exist solely because of some abstract sense that they are good things to do in and of themselves."   □

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